

Come Back When You're Sober

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Come Back When
You're Sober

By

Valerie Farragher

Valerie Farragher asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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I wish to thank my family. Mum and Dad, for never giving up and always pointing me in the right direction. My long-suffering husband, Thomas, who always defended my honour and my children who I love with all my heart and soul.

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Dedication

We would like to dedicate this book to the hundreds and thousands of men, women and children whose lives are affected by the lack of Dual Diagnosis services in Ireland. For those who have passed through services and never made it. And the estimated 1200 people who will die from alcohol related conditions this coming year.

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After a lot of wriggling, shuffling around and pulling at my legs, I finally manage to haul myself over in the bed to get comfortable. Christ, I have to shift some of this weight! I flick on the bedside light. Ouch! Why is light so bright when you switch it on? I take a few minutes for my eyes to adjust and start pawing around for my mobile phone for the time. I know it's amongst this mess. Oh God, it's only 3 am! I sigh, it's gonna be a long night.

My stomach makes a familiar rush of hot and cold sensations, and a panic attack starts to rise inside my body, the shame and fear are back for tonight. I'm thinking of the TV documentary I completed a week ago for R.T.E. (the National Broadcast station) called 'The Moment of Truth' with Blathnaid Ni Chofaigh, telling my story of a mother whose lost in addiction and depression getting into recovery and now helping others.

Since the show, I've been in a whirlwind state of shock and fear. I'm wondering if I've done the right thing. Don't get me wrong, Blathnaid was lovely and treated me with dignity and respect. I enjoyed my day with her. She is hilarious and, well, just...normal. Just another Mum, trying to make her way in life, provide for her children and enjoy her marriage the best she can. Even if she weren't a celebrity, I would put her in the category of a Mum juggling a million things. What I'm worried about is the exposure and criticism I've let myself and my family in for. I throw my eyes around the shadows in the room, while trying to contain the panic I know will stay with me if my thoughts wander, then giggle when my long-suffering husband stirs and mumbles, "Just shut the gate, will ya?!" I guess sleep talkers are easier to manage than sleepwalkers.

My eyes come to rest on my bedside table. It used to be a bedside locker that contained vodka, milk, Gaviscon, a sick bowl and occasionally some Librium, (if I was lucky enough to get through the shakes with the help of a few drugs). Several years into my recovery, the locker was replaced by a coffee table due to all the contents that I surround myself with now. I smile at the comparison from vodka to a makeup box of creams, lotions, nail polishes, perfume and for some reason, a remote that controls nothing! Stacked in piles are all my books that vary from David Williams to books on addiction, mental health, psychology and social care, then, of course, my personal favourites Cathy Kelly, Marian Keyes, Patricia Scanlon, James Patterson and the very naughty but pleasurable Jackie Collins! Not bad reading for a woman that for many years was informed that she was fat, ugly, unattractive and had nothing to offer to the world but pain and financial ruin at the expense of her family's sanity. It takes a lot to drag yourself back when you're walking around with a statement like that, going around inside your already sick and broken mind.

A lot has happened since I heard those horrible words. I squeeze my eyes shut at the memories as if to stop them from entering through my eyeballs and landing in my brain, but the stomach churning and the shame start to rise again. I see myself the day after the R.T.E. documentary is aired, walking down the street, where mothers with their children start hurling abuse at me, tut and shake their heads while protectively covering their children so none of my 'bad motherness' will touch them.

But back in the dim light of my bedroom, I'm holding my head in my hands and tears burn my eyes. I whisper under my breath, so as not to wake my husband, "Oh my God, oh my God, what have I done? Have I just completely ruined my life? What's going to happen to Thomas and the kids? Why do I always have my finger on the self-destruct button?"

I take a few deep breaths and decide there is nothing I can do about it now. So, I pick up my latest fiction book in the hope that I will fall asleep, but it's not my lucky night, and a fly the size of a small bat starts buzzing around my bedside lamp and deliberately dive bombs my face! I wait patiently until it comes back my way, with my book in hand hoping for the element of surprise, but the bastard is faster than I am and I resort to having to turn off the light! So, now I'm in the dark, having a panic attack and pissed off with a fly, my mind wanders back to being in rehab.

I've been to residential addiction rehabilitation four times, been hospitalized dozens of times and detoxed just as much more. So, why could I not get sober? Was I stupid, incapable of being a grown-up and having adult responsibilities? Or did I just not give a shit? Then I get angry and think NO! It wasn't me! I was begging to get sober; that's why I kept going back. But the same model of care and the same care plan was used on me EVERY TIME! Wasn't it Albert Einstein that said; "Insanity; doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results?" Wasn't doing something again and again for four times and expecting different results insanity? So, why every time I went was it said, "You just weren't ready or honest enough with yourself the last time." Or "You haven't been working your programme." Whatever the reason was, it was my entire fault. My motto in life now is; "If at first, you don't succeed, try it a different way!"

So, if I'm feeling all this pain now, why the hell do I now work with families that are going through addiction? Why go on TV and tell the country my private, most embarrassing secrets? Why start writing this book with even more detail than the documentary? The answer; I need to do this for the millions of children yet to be born in Ireland that may succumb to addiction, or forced to grow up with an addicted parent. I need to do it to give a voice to all the women who feel they cannot find any other way but to live a life of misery or suicide. I need to do it for all the family members living with someone who has this very treatable but often ignored condition. I do it to highlight the cost effective options available to us in a costly, slow, already under Healthcare pressure system. And right now, I start a painful remembering, but wanting to forget journey, back through those blurry, agonizing years in the hope that today one life can be saved.

So, this is where I'm at right now, and do you know what? It's ok. At least I'm somewhere. I'm not a 'nobody' anymore; I'm not a 'nothing' anymore. I have an identity. An identity however tarnished, battered and bruised; it is my identity. It's still an identity to be proud of.

Hi, my name is Valerie, and I was a drunken mother.

Valerie's Story

I was born in London in 1969 to loving parents and a good home. I was the second child and two years later my baby sister Yvonne was born. Life was good for my parents, but when Yvonne was four months old she died from cot death, my parent's lives were broken. They were never the same again.

After that, we moved to St. Helens in Northern England. My memories of living in the UK are bittersweet. Home life was good, and I was happy, but I hated school and everything it represented! I could never seem to make any friends and was often made fun of because my Dad was a 'Paddy'. I found this strange because my Dad's name was Joe! Dad worked away a lot, but my parents loved and took great care of us all, ensuring we had everything we needed for love, comfort, and material things.

When I was nine, we moved to Ireland. For me, this was an adventure. By now, I had a little brother called Mark, he was blond and cute. Our Irish house had no running water, an outside loo, and one round pin plug but we thrived in it. It must have been hard for my mother; she had to jump back 100 years to preparing meals on an open fire. But she never complained and flourished on the freedom and adventure. Dad obtained work, and my mother did a lot of the farm work and didn't bat an eyelid when "manly" work needed to be done. Her motto is *"It doesn't matter who does it, what matters is that it's done!"*

In the first year, I was to meet a shy, freckled-faced girl who was to become my best friend for life. Mary and I have had too many adventures and got into so much trouble! Neither of us could settle into a convent routine, and we struggled with discipline and structure. During the first year in the convent, Mary moved to the Tec. I followed next September.

The school was great! Mary and I hung out with other kids smoking, mitching classes, copying homework and chasing boys. She was tall, blond, cute and fashionable and all the boys fancied her. I was short, dark and wore jeans, jumpers, and runners but I still got interest from boys, probably because I was lively, talkative and confident.

I met my husband through Mary when I was doing my Intermediate Certificate, and we started dating. Mary and I both stayed in school until February of the fourth year. I then got an awful job in Claremorris with a horrible boss. My father came to visit me after a few months and told me I looked unhealthy. He brought me straight to a doctor. I recall just crying my eyes out. I felt trapped. I had left school and working life wasn't all it was cracked up to be. If I quit my job and went home, I would have failed. The doctor was kind and sympathetic and told Dad to bring me home. He gave me a few tablets to take for four days. I was 16 and had my first real brush with depression.

Back at home again I soon got restless. I wanted to follow my sister to England. She had gone a year earlier. My parents were not keen but eventually agreed. So, I headed for the boat, promising Thomas that we would ring and write.

When I got to England, I was much better, and I started training as a cook. I got on well with my teacher and was keen to learn. I also learned how much my

parents had done for me and what a beautiful family I have. So, that Christmas I surprised my parents by arriving home.

That Christmas, Thomas and I got engaged. We were standing in line at the chipper after The Nightclub. I was chatting away, and he said: *"I'd marry ya tomorrow if you'd stayed."* I now tell friends *"Ya, a chipper proposal! That should have been my first sign that I was not going to be living a life of luxury! I heard alarm bells and thought they were wedding bells!"* I was 17, full of life, hope and had a future with the man I loved. So like many young couples, we started to make plans for a future. We wanted a large family with at least six children and to build our home. But first we needed to save enough money, there were no opportunities here to make that kind of money, so first thing on the bucket list was; to just earn enough to get to London, get jobs and start saving. I got employment in a coffee shop in Castlebar. I worked hard, saved hard and partied harder.

Mary and I were to be reunited. Thomas came down on the weekends, and I bought extra food. I was determined to make a good wife. During those weekends we were to grow, learn and become adults. Weekends were for heavy drinking. Most of the time it involved "Lock-ins", Nightclubs, and all day Sunday boozing. I got tired of it very fast and wanted to do better things with my time and money. So, I decided I would stop drinking and save my money. I then somehow became the "mammy" of the group and found myself looking after the others.

I didn't have issues with alcohol, but even at 17; I knew it was a waste of time. I told Thomas *"It's time for us to go to England. There's nothing here for us only the pub and scraping by!"* He agreed, and we were to leave the following month.

The weekend before we were to go, Thomas got into a pub fight. A part of his knuckle was taken out, and it was to take six months to heal. He couldn't work on a building site, so there was no point in going. There was going to be no new adventure and new life. I didn't say anything, but I was hurt and angry. His drunken behaviour had cost me my chance of a new life in London. He was happy to continue with his way of life, but I wasn't. There were limited opportunities for girls like me with no education and no chance of going to college. It was expected girls like me marry and have children. Once again, I was trapped somewhere I didn't want to be, living a life I didn't want to live. I didn't want to be one of those shop girls residing in a rented room for years waiting for a man to "take me off the shelf."

I yearned for a family of my own. I would show people I was not just a stupid girl; I would become a fantastic mother and a brilliant, loving wife. So a little later I was to find myself pregnant. Despite the fact we were engaged eleven months, it was expected that we get married. Within days, I was to find myself in the priest's house. I was one of the lucky ones and had a mother to protect me; there was going to be no *"You're a sinner"* comments! But the priest we had was very kind.

I soon gave birth to our first daughter Elaine, a blond haired, blue eyed beauty. I had always wanted a big family and was aiming for six children. So, by the time Elaine was three months I was pregnant again. Thomas's father gave us a house to set up our first home. Thomas and a few lads worked on the house to get it liveable. I was young, energetic and full of beans. I was enjoying life. But when I was seven months pregnant, my parents moved back to England and I felt very lonely. I

had no one except my husband, and that made me feel vulnerable and exposed. Once again, I just got on with it.

Louise was born with a head of black curls and was so cute and tiny. Now that I had my home I could start decorating it. The advantage of my parents going back to the U.K was we got their furniture! About this time, Thomas's Dad was to become precious to me. The whole time I knew him during his life we never had a cross word. In the absence of my father, he stood in.

I, however, was never one to sit 'on my arse' complaining. If I had to make friends, I would go out and meet some. In my area, I was to make lifelong friends. Mary was also living in the village again, and my children were now to have two mothers! Life was the bee's knees, and I knew it!

Soon I became pregnant again. I was twenty and expecting my third child. I certainly was ticking my bucket list off for having a close family when a routine scan showed I had placenta previa. I had to be admitted to hospital and wasn't allowed home until I delivered. I spent three months in the hospital. One day while having a scan I asked the sex of the baby and was told she was a girl, and I started panicking. Mum had, had three girls in a row, and their third girl died. I often lay in the hospital bed at night thinking "*How can I keep her alive? What if she dies in her sleep? I will die if she dies, something bad is sure to happen to her!*" I cried a lot because I felt I wouldn't have much time with my baby. The nurse assured me my baby was perfect, and I shouldn't worry, the placenta previa would not harm her at all, but I couldn't help it and was afraid. Moments after Sarah was born I suffered a placental abruption.

I knew I was in trouble and could see lots of staff running preparing me for surgery. I thought "*It's not the baby that will die, it was to be me.*" I looked at Thomas among all the chaos and noise of alarm bells. He was white with shock and watching me carefully; He also knew it was bad but didn't utter a word; he just let the doctors and midwives do their job. I wondered "*How will he manage on his own? I wanted more time to sort things out.*" But, I knew I didn't have it and could only hope the doctors could save me. That night I woke up, Thomas stood there, and he was aware that the first thing I was going to ask. He whispered to me; "*The baby is fine, she's perfect. They have taken her until you get a bit better, but I will bring her to see you now, ok?*"

Sarah had a beautiful head of dark hair. She was a beautiful baby but for about a year I was terrified of her dying. We kept her in our room longer than the others; we kept her cot at the end of the bed. When she was sleeping, I often nudged or poked her to keep her alert so she wouldn't fall into a deep sleep and die and at night I sometimes shoved the cot with my foot until I heard a noise and knew she was still breathing. This was to be my first real experience of anxiety. Out of the three children Sarah was watched more carefully, I didn't start her on solids until much later than the rest for fear she would choke and didn't let her out of my sight until she was at least three years old and in playschool.

By now, I had three children less than three years of age, but it didn't faze me much. I had now turned twenty-two and was still jubilant with the way of my life. After Elaine joined pre-school, Maureen, the teacher, asked if I would like to train as a pre-school teacher. I thought "*I am not smart. They will take one look at me and*

laugh." But I did it, and that course was one of the best times of my life. I was treated as an equal, my ideas and suggestions were taken on board. The I.P.P.A course gave me confidence and voice. When I became pregnant again, I was delighted, and I knew I was lucky. I had it all, healthy kids and a great career ahead of me. I was now going out at the weekend with Thomas, working, feeling great and renovating the house! But I worked hard at it and deserved it, so it was guilt free.

However, my body was not in agreement with my mind and into my fifth month. I was told I had gestational diabetes. I was about eleven stone when I became pregnant, and suddenly I started packing on the pounds by the day! That summer I had three children under the age of four. We had a heat wave, and I wasn't due until September 30th. My house was gutted for a new water and heating system, and I was very uncomfortable, stressed and living in dangerous conditions. I was induced on the 4th September as my baby was getting too big and ended up having an emergency section. After Siobhán was born, I had a tough recovery due to the weight gain caused by diabetes. My weight after delivery was 18 stone. I was shocked and disheartened. I also had no clothes that fit!

Things were to get much worse after that. Every day was a struggle. I found it hard to get out of bed in the morning. The typical children noises sounded louder and more stressful. I felt like I was carrying heavy stones in my pockets. When I went to bed, I lay there wide awake. I started to isolate myself. Choosing to stay in with a pizza and a video instead of going out, I stopped visiting my friends, but I still didn't know what was wrong with me. I thought I was tired after having four children. This continued for several years. But to the outside world I had everything. Great husband, nice car, lovely house and a great job, to the outside, I was happy, bubbly and friendly. But although I had all of this, my heart and soul were held together with a shoestring. I prayed for days to come so the nights would end and prayed for the nights to come so the days would end, I wondered why I didn't care about anything anymore? Maybe I was stuck in a rut? Having an adventure should move that, and I thought "I believe that it's time for a change." The house was getting full; our family was getting bigger and needed more space.

The house went up for sale! One day, people were coming to view the house about 8 pm. There was a lot of cleaning to do! I was not in the mood, but had to get on with it. I put Siobhan down for her nap (she was almost three years old) then a friend arrived. *"Hey, how are ya? Sit down. What do you want, tea or coffee?"* she smiled, threw her eyes up to heaven and said *"I've just had a run in with that fecker again! Tea won't do it! Do you have anything stronger?"* I said *"Well, there's a bottle of Gin in the wardrobe, but it's been there for years. I'm not sure if it's gone off by now, but I will have a look,"* I arrived back, bottle in my hand. *"Here, I have these big glasses; you'll get a drink and a half!"* She said, *"Jesus, I'm not sitting here drinking unless you have one!"* Gin! Yuk! I hated it. But for some reason, I thought *"Well, I would like her to have a drink 'cause she looks like she needs one."* I said *"Oh God, I hate Gin, but sure I will fill one for you. I'm fine with tea!"* She said *"Oh, I won't bother so. I hate drinking on my own."* I felt guilty as if I was holding her back, so I quickly changed my mind. *"I will have one myself so, how's that?"*

She smiled, and I felt better knowing she was going to get the drink she needed. I slowly sipped it over an hour. I got used to the taste, and I could feel

myself relaxing for the first time in months. At 1.30 PM, Thomas came to ask about dinner. I could see his eyes go wide when he saw the drinks and said: *"What's going on here?"* I threw him a look as if to say *"Can't you see she's upset!"* but my friend got flustered and stood saying *"I better get off now! The kids will be home soon; I have to make the dinner."* She said her goodbyes and left.

I could see at the time that Thomas was not upset with us, but he was upset with us drinking in the middle of the day. He just said *"Let her off and put that bloody Gin away. What possessed you to open it?"* I didn't answer; I didn't care. I was full of energy and moving at top speed. My mind was working better than it had in years. I was alert, energetic and ready to take on the world. I flew through all the jobs, got the dinner cooked and Siobhan was up and fed. The others arrived home to me gutting the house; their dinner was prepared and waiting. I thought *"God! That Gin is great for giving you energy. I can't believe I feel so good and can get everything done without having to drag myself around. I know now what to do. I will wait till the kids are gone to bed in the evening and have a glass of the Gin, then I will get all the housework after the kids are in bed, it's ok,"* I smiled *"I was back! I could function again, that's all that was wrong, I had no energy, but now I know what to do. This is a magic secret."* To this day, I often wonder, what would my life have been like if I had simply made the cup of tea and carried on? Would it be any different, or would the vicious alcoholism still creep into my life?

The house was sold, and we started the new house. It was at Thomas's home place. We bought a mobile home and around the same time, Thomas got a contract in Dublin that would take him away for five months. My sister was also going through a difficult time, and her children came to stay with me for a while. This meant I was living in a two bed mobile home on a building site with five children under the age of nine, had a 'weekend husband' and everything was left for me to do. In the mornings, I'd get the kids to school and go to work, then, come home, organize the kids and sort out the building of the house. This meant having to assemble builders, get quotes, etc. I have to say everything went very well considering building a house is suppose to be stressful, the builders were great, showed up on time and done a good job.

I would often have a few glasses of wine with all the calls and paperwork that needed to be done. I was drinking about two bottles of wine a week. The alcohol was a godsend, and I just know even to this day that without the energy boost, I would never have got the job done. I started to notice that every advert, TV show or poster ad that portrayed a glamorous or beautiful life always had bottles of wine on the table or in the fridge, and when I bought it I felt grown up and sophisticated. I often asked in the off license how many glasses would I get from one bottle as I had "the girls" coming round and would spend ages telling them of the great night that we had planned! Somehow, I felt I didn't want anyone to know I was the only one drinking it alone when the kids were in bed. I felt like they would think I was a bad mother.

I knew there was something wrong with this pattern of drinking.

So I got a phone number for an organization called 'Alcoholics Anonymous' and I was told where a meeting was. When I got to the meeting a man at the front table asked: *"Would you like to say anything?"* I nearly shit myself. *"Erm... Ya... I'm new,*

and I think I have a drinking problem, I just came to see if ye can help me out.” The man at the front smiled and said, *“Well, you’re in the right place. Keep coming back and you will find out.”* After the meeting, people began to talk to me. They were kind, accepting and I enjoyed my time there, but yet, somehow I continued to relapse.

I went to my G.P. My doctor takes his job as a G.P very seriously, and I felt I might be bothering him with this nonsense. I was trying to think how I could tell him about what I was doing and as I was walking in I wanted to run away. I crossed my fingers and walked in the door. *“Hello Valerie, please take a seat.”* I was watching him sort out a few papers on his desk, and then the doctor said: *“Now, what can I do for you?”* I just took a deep breath and blurted it out, the drinking, A.A, everything, then held my breath and waited. The doctor listened very carefully and never took his eyes off me. He leaned back on his chair back, turned towards me, so our knees were facing each other and said *“First, can I say what you have just done is very brave. It takes courage to do this and I’m so glad you are doing something about it. Try not to feel embarrassed or ashamed of what’s happening to you; it happens to lots of people, and it’s treatable.”* I immediately relaxed and was ready to listen. He continued, *“When was your last drink?”* I said, *“About a week ago?”* He said *“Ok, that’s good, you’re detoxed. Now, A.A is a good support group, but sometimes some people need a little extra support and I would like to send you to an addiction counsellor for an assessment. She will be able to help find out how you’re doing and offer more psychological support. How do you feel about that? Do you want to try that?”* I just nodded and wondered, *“What does that involve? Am I going to the hospital?”* The doctor continued, *“You will receive a letter in the post with an appointment.”* I asked if I would be getting any medication. He replied, *“Well, you are already detoxed, and it would be best to wait and see how your assessment goes before considering any medication as it’s not always the solution, is that ok?”* I nodded and thanked him when I got up to leave he said *“Don’t be afraid to come back to us if you have any difficulties. If left untreated, these things can get nasty, and we will support you any way we can.”* One thing that struck me later is that he never said *alcoholic* not very often but often enough for a medical staff member to tell me to *“Come back when you’re ready to get sober.”*

When the letter arrived, it was for the mental health services. I was shocked. *‘Mental health, What am I? A Looney now!* But I trusted my doctor, so I went. I darted to the door and tried to open it, but I needed buzzing in I thought *“Shit! Come on hurry up and open the door before I’m seen!”* There was a sign above my head, *“Ballinrobe Mental Health Services”* ... *Jesus advertise much guys?* My addiction counsellor, a lady, had a kind, gentle face, and warm smile. She looked to me like she was everyone’s favourite sister. I just knew this woman was going to help me, and I was thinking *“I bet she has loads of friends and is well liked.”* I went to a few sessions and was doing well but when I relapsed I felt so embarrassed. I didn’t go back; she didn’t even get enough time to assess me properly, I just ran.

A few years later, I went to a residential treatment centre. The centre was helpful, friendly and the counsellors were kind and supportive. It was very religious based, and if you didn’t go to mass you had to leave, but I was ok with that. I liked mass and found it relaxing. My family came to visit on weekends, and even Siobhan stayed. My care plan was again, the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I learned a

lot about alcoholics and our behaviour. I learned I had a disease and that I had no power over alcohol. The only way to get better from the disease was to go back to A.A meetings and talk about what my drinking was like and what it had done to me. This was so I would never forget I was an alcoholic and a new member might identify with my story and it would help them.

I stayed sober for a few months after coming home and was angry with myself when I relapsed. I decided that it was time for another child, and that along with A.A would keep me away from the booze for another nine months, that way I would have an excellent run at staying sober, and it would stick. This wasn't to be the case, and I drank numerous times during the pregnancy. It was tough and, luckily, I wasn't able to consume too much. Often, I was admitted to hospital afterwards. I went in myself, telling them I was sick and they always drew blood, so I'm sure they knew I was drunk arriving but nothing was said to me. I'm aware it was in my notes that I was alcoholic.

The pregnancy was a mess of worry, guilt and fear. I was living in constant fear. When it was time for routine scans I tried to find an excuse for Thomas not to go in case I was told "Your baby is deformed" or "it's going to be brain damaged because of your drinking." The night T.J was born, I was hung-over but he was born normal and healthy and within 24 hours, I walked out of the hospital with that baby. I promise myself *"that's it. No more drink, I got away with this, but I won't get away with this much longer. I won't do this to my child; he deserves a better mother than a drunken tramp like me. I was going to quit the booze and be better than ever"* but again I was not able to keep my promise, and when T.J was about three months old, I found myself back in rehab; T.J was only a few months old, so I would only wait a few weeks. This time, I stayed sober another five months with the help of A.A. But then, it all kicked off again, each session worse than the last. By now, I was binge drinking, heavily at least once a month and my binges were lasting two to three days. But on top of that, I was spending another three days in bed recovering from the after-effects and hiding away from the family, so I was missing at least a week every month. For the other three weeks, I had no quality of life.

I was not allowed to go anywhere alone or with money, and I only got alcohol when the opportunity came, and I would manage in some way to get some cash and get to town. There was just no controlling me or the drinking, and I was out of control and needed to do something drastic. I was doing more dangerous actions and taking risks. When T.J was about 18 months, I had heard of another treatment centre. It was a fair distance away, but I had heard people in AA say only for they went there they would never have got sober. Thomas and I went for an assessment. I was told I was probably drinking because I was a food addict. This was new, but I was told research showed people who eat certain foods become addicted to lots of stuff and until I cut out such foods, I would always drink.

It was suggested I go to another meeting for food addicts like me. I went for a few months, tried the plan but it was complicated, and I couldn't buy a lot of the products. I went for two more assessments and then I was accepted in. I thought *"Great this is what I need, a new way of eating and a really good 12 step programme."*

What I got was not that. My counsellor was an older man. We had nothing in common, and I think he hated women. Some of it was ok, but I found the programme

and working with my counsellor humiliating, degrading and shameful. I accepted this as part of the treatment and that they were "beating it out of me" so I took everything on board. My counsellor once said "*Valerie, what do you think people see when they look at you?*" I said, "*erm...don't know; they probably think I'm ok when I'm not drinking.*" He took a deep disappointed breath "*Why do you eat like this? It causes you to drink, look at your body. It's fat, ugly, and unattractive. You have ruined your children's lives. They will never be the same because of your selfish behaviour. How can you live with that shame and embarrassing them like that? You are a terrible wife and bring nothing but pain and anger to your marriage. You have single handedly destroyed everything you have ever done in your life*" I know the kids hated the therapy. It just wasn't for our family, but none of us knew it at the time, and each of us absorbed something from it. The letters were the worst for us all. Each of the kids had to write them, and I had to read them out in front of everyone in a group session. Siobhan's letter was the first I read. It was given to me as the group was sitting down, so I didn't get a chance to read it over first. It mentioned a day when Thomas was trying to get me to go to bed and sober up. I, myself, recalled the day very well, and although it was a serious topic, I smiled inside at the memory. I remembered it had taken him 10 minutes to get me up the stairs as I kept fighting him and calling him names and when he got me at the top he gave me a small kick in the arse as a warning not to try and run down again. I never thought much of it then and still don't. It was the one and only time he ever did anything like that to me, it's hardly worth mentioning; however Siobhan seemed to be upset by it and said it in her letter. While I was reading the letter, my counsellor stopped me and said: "*You are incapable of feeling anything, this is a desperate letter from your child, why are you not crying?*" This pissed me off, and I said: "*Because I'm trying to concentrate on the words, do you want to hear it or not?*" After the letter was read, it was time to go around the group for everyone to throw in their 'tuppence worth' and judge me!

My counsellor said "*Do you see what you are doing to your husband, do you understand what you are making him do; you are driving him mad*" I threw him a dirty look and hissed under my breath "*You condone violence to a woman?*"

The next day, I was told in morning group I was not to speak for the day; this was because "*You are talking and not feeling.*" That wasn't easy. I had to hide away from everyone and at break times I had to go around to the other side of the building to smoke alone. I didn't want to get anyone else in trouble, so I avoided them so they wouldn't speak to me. The dinner that day was the hardest as I wasn't talking at the table. Anyone who knows me well knows I talk ALL THE TIME! However, for the rest of the time, it wasn't bad, the food was nice, and I enjoyed the company of the other clients. I learned from them that the idea of the treatment is to break you down and put you back together like an ordinary person and if I couldn't handle the breaking down to just play the game. I asked what this meant, and they said "just do anything they ask and admit you're an alcoholic, things will get better" and it did. The problem was, I was broken down, but they were not able to fix me because I just "played the game". I was going to suffer because of this but not just for a while. In the meantime, everything was rosy in the garden. This was when I wrote my first letter to alcohol, breaking up with it.

Dear Alcohol

I'm writing you this letter to let you know we can no longer be friends. When we first met I was very young and you seemed such great fun and were very exciting, my mother warned me about you but I played with you anyway, it was fun at the time.

At seventeen I got sick of you, I wanted to do other things but you would always convince my friends that going out with you was much more fun. I didn't want to spoil their weekend so I went along with it but I decided the best thing to do was go out but I would avoid being around just you. I seen them messing around with you all night and although I didn't mind I got sick of the stupid things you would get them to say and do. I was glad I wasn't acting that stupid and whenever they got into real stupid thinking and talking you would abandon them and leave. I also know that some of the people that hung around with us back then stayed with you and are dead now because you wore them out.

When we met again in my late 20's, you were a great help. You helped with the housework and put me in a better mood. You also helped me to stay awake; my energy level was so zapped! I enjoyed having you around but from very early on Thomas didn't, he would always say you shouldn't be in anyone's house when they were rearing a family. But he didn't understand that we had an exclusive relationship, and you were a great comfort and support to me when there was no one to help me with all the children and housework. I have to say with all honesty I don't think I would have got through all the work that had to be done without your help. However things started to turn nasty between us, and I felt you were overstaying your welcome. I wanted you to go because Thomas kept complaining but you wouldn't take the hint! Soon I had to hide you in the house, so the others didn't know you were there, and whenever they found you they threw you out so why did you keep coming back?

I soon became so dependent on you. I even put my marriage at risk by running away with you but my family knew it would never work between us, you would have killed me within a year so they would come and collect me. I wouldn't mind, you were useless and of no help so I don't know why I needed you.

You're always making me and the kids cry and cost a fortune to keep, I spent my kids' college money on you, what kind of a mother does that? An appalling one and that's what you have done to me, so I am begging you to stay away from me I can't take any more of this; I have found someone else.

I'm safe in A.A, and you cannot get in here. Every morning and evening I pray to make sure you stay away this will protect me from your harmful influence. I know this because I've been told, others in the group will make sure you don't get to me; they've had you in their lives and knew how they keep you away. They say when I see you I should call them. They tell me you are cunning, baffling and powerful, and that's why I need to keep you out of my life.

If you ever come back my family has said to me I've to leave with you. I don't know where you live, but I'm sure it's not anywhere nice. I'm choosing my family over you; I love them not you, and I don't want you back.

I have to go now so goodbye forever.

I went to aftercare for seven months. Thomas hated it and was always complaining about having to go. I told him he didn't have to, but he felt if he didn't I would start drinking again. I didn't mind aftercare. The facilitators were lovely, and the group was friendly. I felt I had a fairly good handle on things. But according to my family I started acting weird. I put Alcoholics Anonymous books in all bathrooms so family members would read them and start living the AA life. I was petrified of eating addictive foods because I knew what would follow...the booze! I made everyone eat my "special" food, pray and say the slogans and I started dragging my toddler into mass almost daily. I also made the others go to Al-Ateen.

They didn't want to go, but I forced them. I bought Polytunnels, hens, and pigs and didn't, or couldn't, properly look after them. My reasoning behind this was if I weren't in the house I wouldn't think of drink. But I didn't account for the depression and that I would still spend lots of time in bed or just on the chair in the kitchen, feeling unable to move but wanting to, seeing things that needed to be done just being left or Thomas and the kids having to do them. Again, I felt useless, a burden. A drink would solve that...just one to get me started. Again, to the world outside my family, I appeared to be doing very well and had a handle on things, but I was driving my family crazy with my erratic behaviour. That summer I had an accident while drinking that changed the way my body works today. I had been drinking since the morning, and all the kids were at home. We had bought a trampoline that summer and Siobhan, T.J and Edwina's children were bouncing on it. I was only half way through my usual bottle of vodka, so when they called me to come and jump with them I thought it would be great fun! But what happened was I tore the ligaments in my left knee.

Poor Louise and Edwina had to try and haul me off the trampoline and into the house. I'm no lightweight and two healthy men would struggle with that task! I didn't go to casualty until a few days later when I was sober, but because of my weight, they could do nothing for me. I was seven months on crutches and often fell when I was drunk because my leg went from under me. Looking back now it's hilarious, but I have done permanent damage to my body from abusing alcohol.

People who knew me outside the home were starting to notice things, and I was stealing alcohol from my father-in-law's and Edwina's house. My appearance meant nothing anymore, and if it covered me, I wore it. It didn't matter what it was. The others must have thought I just didn't care, or my drinking was just getting worse but I was having a full blown mental breakdown, and the crash was approaching fast. I wasn't in any treatment that could recognize this...I was in addiction treatment. And most addiction treatment centres don't deal with mental health or have a psychiatric backup. So there was no way for anyone to predict what would happen next. However, even when the opportunity did come, I slipped through the HSE net again.

Once I was in casualty waiting for a detox. I somehow found myself in the Psychiatric Department talking to an on-call doctor. Elaine, my eldest daughter, was with me. I asked her to stay as she was an adult and might have had a bit of clout getting me a bed because my G.P has always sent my admission letters for that Dept. I was crying my eyes out begging him to lock me up that *I Had* to get sober, and I just came out and said: "*If I can't get sober I will have no choice but to kill myself.*" The

doctor just shook his head and said: *"Come back when you're sober."* A furious Thomas collected us, and I was sent to the room again, where I stayed for a couple of days. The hangovers were getting worse. My stomach was completely raw, I was guzzling more and more milk to stop the pain and heartburn, I spent loads of money on bottles of indigestion remedies, the milk was the best cold but not too cold, or it hurt my stomach. One particular morning, I came downstairs after Thomas had left for work and grabbed the litre carton of milk he left beside the sink. I opened the spout and started to drink, about half way down I heard a thud inside the container. I stopped drinking and peeped inside the carton. There I saw a big clump of solid sour milk. Thomas had left it beside the sink to give it to the dogs that evening with their food. I just thought *"oh, shit! I'm gonna throw up!"* and I started getting sick. All I had drunk was the water out of the sour milk. I couldn't taste anything as my taste buds were as good as dead. From that day on I always "shake and smell!"

The last six months were the worst and by now I was in a bad way as I started to hear voices.

Oddly, it was a man's voice and use to scare the shite out of me. I only ever heard the voice when I was drinking. It would start about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way into a drink. It never said much just "Don't do it." or "Why are you doing it?" and "look at yourself you drunk bitch, you should be ashamed" it was about this time I started engraving notes and nasty words about myself into anything with biro/pens and knives.

I hated my fat, ugly, useless self. I would often slap myself across the face till it stung. I'd punch myself in the stomach, bite and tear at my skin, bang my head on the walls. Also, try to knock myself out by hitting myself over the head with empty vodka bottles or opening the door fast into my head and pull out clumps of hair. I even tried to stab myself, but it hurt too much. I was screaming by now at Thomas and the kids; I was as angry as hell, mad at life for being so cruel, at God for abandoning me, at alcohol for existing, at me for being alive. Why, oh, God why couldn't I stop drinking! To this day I have no idea how Thomas did it, how he coped and what it must have been like for him to see me like that. At night I was always in bed before him. When he came into the room I always pretended to be asleep, this so he couldn't ask me "what was it today that set you off drinking" but he always just climbed into bed. Then sighed and ran his hand over my hair whispering *"what am I going to do with you?"* then he would pull me in close and cuddle me. He always loved me, and it was killing me. I wanted him to hate me and kick me out, but I suppose deep down he knew I was sick.

I wondered what the best way to kill myself in the car was. Should I drive and hit something head on or drive off a pier and drown myself? The drowning wasn't such a good idea as I am a strong swimmer, so that was out. I wasn't sleeping properly anymore, just passing out then jumping awake with a start. Days were nights and nights were days. I was breathing in and out and just wasting air. Once when I got a few weeks sober, I decided if I ever had cravings for alcohol ever again that, I would use the next binge to kill myself. There was no way this could go on. It was cruel to Thomas, the kids and me. Soon the uncontrollable thoughts came. I knew it was time for me to die. I had no choice but to kill myself; there was something seriously fucked up with me, and I was a nuisance to society.

I always envisioned a peaceful death in a nursing home with my children around me when it was my time to go, not like this. Not by my hand. I know that the kids and Thomas will be upset, but I'm out of options I never wanted anything like this for myself. It certainly wasn't on my bucket list! I can't imagine anyone knows how, what day and time they are going to die except people that are brought to the Netherlands for euthanasia or those who choose suicide, like me.

Funny thing about this position I found myself in, is whenever I heard about anyone that choose suicide I always thought: *"How could they do this to their family? Why the hell didn't they just talk to someone and what the hell drove them to that? Nothing is ever that bad!"* Well, now I know. At the time I felt, for me, there is no choice about it, I have to die. I will not keep subjecting my family to this. I won't let the person that has taken over this body that used to be mine pick off my family one by one. I had been saying it at home, in rehab, in the hospital, at clinics, in group therapy and not one person heard me. Why is it so hard for them to hear me say? *"I can't go on like this much longer; something is going to give. I can't do this anymore. I can't fight anymore. I'm so tired!"* Did they choose not to? Did they want me dead or just couldn't be bothered to listen so they didn't have to deal with me?

I did as I was told in all the recovery rooms, rehabs and the like, but for me, it was not to be. I am one of those who cannot get sober. So, here I am. In the room I share with my husband, sitting on the edge of the bed facing the door that I am not allowed out of till I am sober. I decide the least painful way was drinking myself to death.

I have heard of it before when people bleed from their stomach and bleed out within minutes, I would do that and then it would look like it wasn't suicide or if I had enough I would suffer from alcohol poisoning and fall asleep, never to wake up again. This way, I would be just another alcoholic victim. I drank for days but couldn't get anywhere near getting drunk. My body was shaky and numb, but my mind was very alert, focused and clear. However, this suicide still needed to be done. *Just look at me.* I looked in the mirror at myself. It's day 3 of the suicide mission I see myself so bloated. My eyes are sore from conjunctivitis like bloodshot infected dots in my face; my skin has gone all flaky and raw, and I have some flakes falling in hard lumps onto my face causing the eye infections. My hair hasn't been washed for at least a week, and alcohol is pumping out through my pores and stinking up the room. I run my eyes down the mirror at my body and see one shape, round, no coordinates. *Jesus, I'm not even a good looking drunk!*

I can see my face going red and realize I'm embarrassed even to look at my disgusting self. In some sick way, I want it to hurt because I deserve it, and more, I should not be let off this easy. In fact, I should be beaten to death with sticks and thrown in a bog hole because I am a waste of space, time, and energy. I am selfish and a coward. Look at me. I can't even kill myself without getting drunk first.

Somehow, though, I know if I were sober I would change my mind, they would all have to live with me even longer, there is no point prolonging their agony. I start thinking about why I am still alive after all this drinking I have done in the last few days, surely it's impossible for someone to survive this. There are several empty bottles of vodka and whisky hidden around the room, under clothes, in washing baskets and in the en suite so, why the hell am I still alive?

I'm vomiting blood since yesterday, and I have become so dehydrated that when I pee it's not much, and there is blood in it. Hopefully, I have internal bleeding, and I might die soon. I stand up on wobbly legs and move towards the door. I want so much to rush out and hold my children, even be able to kiss them goodbye and tell them I'm sorry. I know I will be told to get out of their sight and not to come back till I'm sober. So I put my ear to the door and listen to the familiar family sounds. Some of the kids are chatting while Thomas tells them to clear the table for dinner in his usual "Fuck sake girls, I hope ye marry wealthy 'cause you're screwed otherwise" way.

The TV is on in the background, and I hear T.J wandering around in the hallway that separates the two rooms, they seem happy enough despite what's going on a few feet away from them. Thank god they don't know. And then I suddenly realize there is no use for me anymore; they have been managing for ages without me, and they are going to be fine. I decide there is no time like the present and that drinking myself to death isn't working. I look around the room for anything else that might do the job. Unfortunately, we don't live in America and A.K 47'S are not in our bedside lockers!

So I have to improvise. I start wandering slowly around the room in the hope that someone might come into me before I get the chance to do anything and say *"Hey, we know you're sick. It's ok, go to bed. We will talk tomorrow"* But somehow I know that won't happen. They are sick and tired of saying that every time I drink. I go into the en suite to see if there is anything that will cut or poison me, one way or the other I was bailing out tonight, and there on the radiator I see my small copy of Alcoholics Anonymous. I take this as a sign that I am not to die and pick it up, go back into the bedroom and sit on the bed. The book tells me nothing new or hopeful. I'm still in the same boat.

I have done all the books, and the rehabs told me to do, I have handed everything over to God and let him decide what's right for me, I have made so many searching inventory's that I might as well write a book! Admitted everything I done was wrong and was willing and even done everything I could to make amends. I have stayed out of the way of my husband and children, so they get on with their lives, and I have not interfered in any way except to get them to listen to words of the big book and words of God and that God will take care of them. I have said sorry a million times and even wrote letters. I have removed my self-will because I was told time and again *"The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self will can hardly be a success"* and I have given myself up to the care of God. Yet, I find myself here ready to die so peace and comfort can come into this house.

The drinking wasn't working, but I remember that aerosol cans are dangerous, I heard of some teenager dying because he was sniffing aerosol spray. I know there is deodorant in the en suite, so I stagger back to the bathroom...*"Do I seal the room and then spray the can and breathe in the fumes? I think I saw on TV they sniff it? So I took the spray and put the nozzle to my nose and sprayed while taking a deep breath through my nose. The result was devastatingly painful and threw me back so fast I slammed off the bathroom door. I slid down to the floor, it burned, it burned so badly and the coughing fit was hard, I was coughing out so much I couldn't inhale correctly, even if I wanted to my body wasn't going to stop*

gasping and sneezing. I immediately knew this wasn't the right way to do this and started to blow hard through my nose, the pain in my sinuses was horrendous, and my chest was on fire. I managed to crawl on my hands and knees to the bed and drag myself on. I was very dizzy. I wasn't sure if it was from the deodorant or lack of oxygen but then very suddenly I started to vomit, it was just a mass of blood, and it was hot against my face and down my cheek. In some way it was a comfort to know that death would surely come now but, by God, it was going to be a horrible death. However, it would be over soon.

I'm not sure how long later, I think probably twenty minutes that I woke, but I was very disappointed and sore all over. By now, I was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol leaving my system and I was cold and feeling sick with the tremors were on the way. I still had some alcohol in the room and knew it was the only thing that could help me now. I made sure just to take a little bit because I knew once I took the cure I would throw it straight back up, so I took the sick bowl, washed it out under the tap in the en suite and then filled a tiny glass of vodka while standing over the sink. I drank the vodka and then felt the taste in my mouth, within seconds it was up again and still cold. *Jesus, did it even get to my stomach?* But I kept forcing myself to heave and put my fingers back my throat until I knew my stomach was empty. So as to ensure the next drink would not come back, and I would have wasted very little alcohol, and because my stomach was empty, it would hit my bloodstream fast and take the edge off of this awful feeling.

There was about half a litre of vodka left so I decided to try and drink it in one go and hopefully that would finish me off. Unfortunately for me, it was not my day, and all that happened was my body went numb again. I knew at this stage I had no alcohol left, and the aftermath of this drinking session was going to be the pits, so if I was going to die, I needed to get a move on because I would chicken out when I sobered up.

I looked in the wardrobe for a belt or something to hang myself with. I found a shirt tie belonging to Thomas; he only had one for weddings and funerals. I smiled when I took it out because he hates wearing a tie and it's like pulling teeth trying to get one on him! I'm sure he will be delighted to see it gone. There isn't anything though to hang it off. I can't reach the curtain pole, and the wardrobe bar is too low down, after a few minutes I notice the hook that is on the back of the door; it's the same height as me, but I have an idea. I tied a noose around my neck then took it off over my head; I then put on a pair of socks. Why? Because if I change my mind when I slide myself down the door, I won't have any grip on the laminate floor with soft socks on and I wouldn't be able to chicken out.

I then turned around and tied a knot on the door hook, put my back to the door, put the noose back around my neck and tighten it up. I knew, this time, it would work, and I would die from hanging. I stood for a long time just looking around the room at things. Thinking to myself "This is the last time I will see Thomas's jeans, the DVD's scattered on the bedside locker. The super king size bed that I bought when I was pregnant so myself and Thomas would have more comfort while I was breastfeeding, the quilt, and cover that took me ages to find, the new Jackie Collins book that Elaine bought me.

I wondered "Will I have any memories of my life and children when I die? If I did then surely, I would have an eternity of pain, watching them grow and know it was I that damaged them in that way. However, it was better than me staying here and causing more damage. What will the kids tell their children about me? I hope it's that I was a good person who couldn't stop drinking and not that I was an evil bitch.

Am I going straight to hell? I deserve it if I do. I'm not sure why but my chest still felt tight and constricted; I think it could have been the deodorant or anxiety. I then slide myself down the door. I closed my eyes because I didn't want to be found with them open I'm not sure why that mattered. There was no white light or movie picture reel of my life, but I did have images and thoughts of my husband and children. I saw my husband happy with another wife who was kind and loving to him. I saw my kids getting off the school bus laughing and smiling. A tremendous sense of peace and contentment came over me although tears were burning my face because I knew I would never get to enjoy these moments with them. I had lost my chance of happiness when I chose alcohol over my family.

Then, suddenly out of nowhere, my mother's face flashes in front of me and my eyes fly open at the thought of putting her through having to bury another child, and I knew I couldn't do it to her. I started to stand but because I had socks on I just kept slipping back, and I was struggling to get out of the situation, panic set in and I tried to shout out but the noose was very tight, and the deodorant had made my throat hoarse. The room was getting darker, and I knew I was dying, but it was now a death with terrible regret, guilt, and sorrow.

"Mum, Mum," I could hear a faint sound and felt something pushing my hip backwards and forwards causing my body to rock slightly. I opened my eyes, and everything was blurry. I felt cold on one side of my body; I have a metallic taste of blood in my mouth, and I run my tongue around to see if I have lost a tooth. After a few seconds, I focused enough to see T.J standing in front of me. I lay on the floor, he was using his foot on my hip to shake me while pointing a banana in my face and said "*Dad said to eat the nana*" Somehow he didn't seem distressed to find me on the floor? I mumbled, "*Thanks, loveen, leave it on the window*" then crawled up onto the bed. And off he went on his way back playing or whatever he was up to.

I couldn't believe I was alive or was I? Had I just died from hanging myself, hadn't I? What was I doing here? I feel around my neck, and the tie is still there, I look at the door and see the hook I hung myself off has gone; it's now on the floor....Holy shit I'm still alive! I have been given another chance, my Mum will not have to bury another child, I need to make this right, and I need to do it now! I saw the house phone thrown on top of the laundry basket, and I knew I had West-Docs number stored in it in case any of the kids were sick, and I needed someone fast. I rang them and when the nurse answered I said "I have just tried to hang myself" and then everything happened at lightning speed. She asked various questions and said someone was on the way to my house and that she would phone me back in a few minutes. Louise came back to the room, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what had just happened.

While I was in the hospital, I was seen by a psychiatrist. I never knew his name, and I don't think I ever saw him again, so it's strange. When I was discharged from the hospital, I was told I would be attending my local mental health services

and would be allocated a psychiatrist and addiction counsellor. I knew my addiction counsellor would be there, and although this should have been a comfort to me, it wasn't actually. I was embarrassed by going back. I thought she was going to be thinking I'm so full of shit and untreatable and she would probably be right. I was sick and tired of getting my hopes up only for them to be dashed by my behaviour. When it was time to go and see the psychiatrist Thomas came with me. He came because I needed a second pair of ears and also so he could find out what the hell was going on. The psychiatrist asked Thomas what I was like when I wasn't drinking. Thomas said once again "Well, she is lovely and a great wife and mother." The psychiatrist looked closely at Thomas, leaned in and said "No, that's not what I asked. What I want to know is what she is really like when she is not drinking?"

Thomas knew what he was being asked, and he put his head down, looked at me through the corner of his eye and was embarrassed. I nodded at him as if to say "*go on, say it. This is your chance to help me*" and then Thomas told the doctor in an embarrassed manner that, I was having trouble getting up in the mornings, keeping up with the housework and he often found me in bed during the day. The psychiatrist nodded to Thomas and explained they are all signs of depression.

We worked out between the three of us that this depression had started after Siobhan was born. The psychiatrist said I must have had post natal depression that was left untreated, and that alcohol made me feel better, but then I became dependent on it. I thought this was just another bull shit line from someone else that claimed to be an expert and was just giving me his version. I had been given many reasons over the years about why I drank, but none of them were right. I think he could tell from the way I was disinterested in what he had to say because he said: "*Valerie, just give me one year to help, 52 weeks of your time, ok?*" I said I would do as he asked, what had I left to lose?

My addiction counsellor was very happy to see me and welcomed me back with open arms. She told me the medication that the psychiatrist put me on was nothing to worry about, and I shouldn't be on them for long. She started telling me it was now my time to get well and to decide what I wanted to do, and she would help me find it. As the medication started to work, I found it easier to concentrate but more importantly, I was starting to retain the information and advice that my counsellor gave me. One thing she said to me and still echoes in my head is "*think for yourself, make your own choices*" the first time she said this, I was worried. Driving home that day, I was thinking "*She's the counsellor, why is she telling me to do all the thinking? Isn't it her bloody job to get me well and tell me how to do it?*" Of course, I know now that what she said to me that day was to change my life forever. What she did was gave me power and control over my own future.

When I went to my first AWARE meeting, I smoked loads of cigarets worrying about what I was going to be confronted by. I wondered "*Were they all going to be sitting in a corner rocking and sucking their thumbs? What if someone attacks me and I have my throat cut? Would anyone rescue me? Who opens and closes that meeting? In AWARE it must be someone who is not depressed. Jesus, they must be in great form all the time. I bet it's someone perfect and smart. More bullshit to tolerate!*"

As I walked to the door, I heard a woman say *"Hi, you going in?"* I nodded, and she gave a big bright smile and said *"Great! Me too I'm Brid and I'm one of the facilitators tonight."* She put her arm on my shoulder. It felt warm and comforting, and she led me towards the door. I smiled at her as if I knew what she was talking about and said *"Oh, that's good, my name is Valerie"* all the time I was thinking *"What the feck is a facilitator? Wonder if facilitators are nurses? She looks like a nurse, oh, please God let this group be run by psychiatric nurses! They will make sure I don't get stabbed in the heart"* We entered the room, and it was tiny, but warm and cosy room with several people sitting in a small circle of chairs, Brid said, *"Hey everyone, this is Valerie. She is going to be coming to our meeting tonight, and this is her first time."* Everyone said *"Hi Valerie"* I wanted to make eye contact with the others, but I thought it might be best not to. I kept my eyes on the ground. I was listening to chitter chatter, they talked about funeral arrangements, the weather and hopefully it wouldn't be a bad winter and the cost of living in a recession. It all seemed relatively standard and your regular everyday chatter. Brid came into the room again and sat in her chair. She welcomed everyone and then invited us all to introduce ourselves, and she introduced a second facilitator who sat in the group across from Brid. I wondered *"She looks like a nurse too. Wow, these women could really help me."*

As people said their names, I soon realized I was sitting in a room with people who were schizophrenic, bipolar, depressed and anxious it sounded like it was the opening to a terrible joke! But they all seemed "normal" the meeting continued, and others shared about the week they had had, difficulties they faced recently and how they overcame them.

They also talked about upcoming events that might in some way cause challenges and some other worries. Others interacted with tips and advice from their own experience and this group that I thought was full of crazy people was turning out to be a room full of really sane people that were working some kind of massive "any kind of problem-solving group." Nobody talked much about their "illness" except one or two who mentioned their doctor was increasing or decreasing their "meds."

Before the meeting finished, I was asked if I would like to say anything, so I just said, *"Hi. I'm Valerie."* I almost said, *"and I'm an alcoholic."* I was stuttering and feeling stupid, but thanks to my experience of A.A I could talk. I continued *"I just came out of hospital 'cause I tried to hang myself, the doctor and nurses up in the mental health place up the road put me on some tablets and told me to come here tonight, so I'm here."* Some others then spoke saying they too had tried to kill themselves, but they don't feel that way now and to give the medication and AWARE a chance for a while; that it had worked for them, and it might work for me. I couldn't believe these ordinary friendly people would ever try to kill themselves as they appeared to have pleasant lives, jobs and families so why would they do that?

But then I realized, I too had all those nice things. There might be hope for me yet! When the meeting finished I sat at the table for the nicest cup of tea, I had enjoyed in ages. My throat was getting better, and my taste buds were starting to work again. I was feeling more confident already, and as I sat there just watching the others interacting, chatting about regular stuff and laughing I thought *"This is the*

sanest bunch of crazy people I have ever met! Maybe all the rational people are in here, and the crazies' are out there!"

I drove home that evening with a load of books, leaflets and C.D's that were given to me, a smile on my face and hope in my heart. I also found out that facilitators were people who were specially trained in the area of mental health and had specific and focused training on managing groups in delicate circumstances. After a few more weekly meetings, I was told there were family meetings, and I could ask my family to come one evening.

I didn't know if Thomas and the kids would come. It was still early days in my recovery, and they were still waiting for me to go drinking again. I did ask, though, and they said "Yes." A woman called Maura, who was a trained facilitator, took them into another room. Things in our home were much, much better after that evening. My family stopped questioning me and started relaxing around me. If I went for a nap during the day, they would just leave me and not nag anymore. This gave me room to manoeuvre and chance to "take a breath". Months passed, I was keeping all my psychiatric appointments, attending the psychiatric nurse, meeting with my addiction counsellor and taking my medication and things were starting to get much better. I'm not suggesting it was perfect by any means; there were still fights and arguments, but they were just "normal" family disputes. Life went on, and I went along with it. One particular day, I went to see my counsellor and was afraid because I thought I had Bi-Polar disorder. I had heard a lady in a group talking about her ups and downs and figured I had the same symptoms. My counsellor assured me I didn't have Bi-Polar and even asked the duty psychiatric nurse to pop in for a few minutes to reassure me. This was when I started to realise what an excellent service this was as everyone was in the same building. The psychiatrist, the psychiatric nurses and the counsellors all used the same building and often had tea at the same table. They have a lot of contact with each other and can call on each other for support whenever it's needed.

About a year or so into my AWARE meeting I was telling Brid what a good facilitator she was and how glad I was that I had started coming, and she said "Why don't you train as a facilitator? You give lots of good feedback in the group and I think you would thrive on it." I was very pleased to hear this, and although I was interested, I felt I would only make myself look stupid because I hadn't even a Junior Certificate and wasn't exactly the "intelligent" type. I asked her a few more questions and then thought, *feck it! Sure, I'll go to one training session and see how it works.* I have never looked back, and I became a group facilitator. Within two years I also facilitated online groups. Little did I know that on that very first night that I went to AWARE, meeting those people in that small room that they would help me shape my life to be something beautiful, worthwhile and essential.

All this training was excellent, and I was thriving on it and the work we were being given. Trust me; I was getting more than I was giving because learning and understanding about mental health was bringing me further into recovery, but I was hungry for more. I wanted to "finish" for good with alcohol, so I wrote another goodbye letter;

Alcohol,

I would say "Dear alcohol" but there is nothing dear about you, in fact, you cost my family and me more than money so fuck the pleasantries, your piece of shit.

What's the story with sniffing around my life and home, I have told you before to fuck off, you're not wanted here and trust me when I say that.

You arrived when I was at my lowest and most vulnerable, and you knew I was sick, and an easy pushover and you took advantage of me. You do this as a career, just going around picking off the young, sick and weak. You do it to destroy and cause havoc because this is what you most enjoy, how is it that the strong and sound minded never fall into your trap? Cos they can see you coming a mile off and know to befriend you with caution and a careful eye. Chances are you abused someone they knew and loved, and they don't want you doing the same thing to them. However you still knock about in the hope they will become weak or sick some day, and you can pounce. The young are more vulnerable. You spend a lot of time with them, knowing that once they learn to live with you, you will make them feel that they can't live without you. You tell them all the time they look stupid going out without you and you are the one that makes them funny and courageous and God love them because they are young they often fall for your pathetic bullshit.

Do you know what? I can deal with your bullshit that you call "fun and relaxing" but I won't let you destroy my husband and children through me in the process, you have nothing to offer me, and you have nothing that I want.. You are a piece of shit on the foot of society and believe me when I say that yes, there may be a lot of people hanging around you now, but they are being warned about you and people are beginning to realize you're not as "cool and funny" as you think you are. You make young people look pathetic when ye have been out all night, and others laugh at them for acting out with you.

Watch your back cos I won't be far behind you, watching, waiting and always smiling at you the way you did to me; payback is a bitch, and I'm the biggest bitch that ever was when it comes to you.

*I have to agree that you are cunning and baffling, but you **certainly are not** powerful, do you think for a minute that if I were well and strong I would have let you in? Why do you think you didn't get accepted into my life until I was in my late 20's? It's because when I first met you, I was too strong and of sound mind to let a scumbag like you come into my home and start dictating how I should act and feel, promising me great things, ha, that's a laugh! The only thing that's powerful about you is your stink! And believe me, you can't half stink up a room! You will be remembered for being a dirty, nasty wolf in sheep's clothing.*

So stay the fuck away from my children and me

Signed

Your worst nightmare

The Learning Curve

I loved AWARE but I wanted to move further into research and I became fascinated by the human brain and how it worked. I wasn't sure how I was going to do this, though. I did know I didn't want to be a counsellor or therapist; I just wanted to support and help people, so I started looking at college websites. This confused me even more because I had never been to college and didn't know what undergrad, post grad or Ph.D. courses were. Everything looked expensive and complicated, and I just couldn't figure out how I was going to find out what I wanted to do. I started asking the kids about their class in school they had called Career Guidance in the hope that I might be able to find one, but they said: "Feck sake Mum! Just do a night class and don't go near my Guidance Teacher. You'll make me look a right eejit!" So, that put a halt to my gallop!

Just before Christmas in 2009, I was flicking through the Mayo Advertiser and came across an advert for a Fetac level 5 Course in Community Addiction Studies, and I immediately thought *I wonder if I could do this?* It looked like a course for beginners, like me, and the cost was manageable, so I put my name down and in January off I went to Castlebar to try not to make myself look like a dumb arse!

I was very surprised to see how relaxed everything was. The trainer's name was Sean Foy, and he was a man that appeared to be in his early 40's. He wore casual clothes and had a kind face. He greeted everyone coming in the room with; "Hey, how's it goin'? Sit anywhere you want." When class was ready to start he announced; *"Ok guys, let's do some drugs!"* I had to laugh and thought to myself *Yes, please!* But continued on listening...

As the class went on, Sean started to show us, on a projector, images of drugs and was talking about where they came from how they were made, grown, discovered, etc., the good and bad side effects of taking them and harm reduction in regards to using drugs. I was so naïve and innocent when it comes to things like illegal drugs. I had never heard anyone speaking in such a way before that I was shocked to hear this. The only time I ever heard anyone speak in public about drugs was when I heard it on TV, on the news or documentaries. As far as I was concerned, if it was illegal or wrong, you didn't talk about it! I was looking around the room at the others to see if they were as shocked as I was and everyone seemed to be nodding in agreement and taking notes!

I was thinking in my head, *My God he is talking about drugs like they are normal! Jesus, I hope there are no cops in the room! We are sure to be all questioned or worse...arrested! Either that or this is some kind of 1960 drug group that is trying to get people to believe that drugs aren't all that bad.* I couldn't understand how a grown man could talk so easily about something like dirty, horrible drugs and all those druggie people with needles in their arms and living on the streets.

I decided it was best to listen to what he had to say because I was just having this argument inside my head that was saying, *Shut up Sean you will have the cops down on us... actually, tell me more I'm curious.* It was later in the course I discovered there is more to drugs than what parents and TV show us. I started to learn about choices, respecting other people's decisions, harm reduction and that drug abusers don't start their lives intending to end up this way, that there is more to people that

use drugs than the drug itself and that I should not be afraid to learn about these things.

On one particular evening, Sean was discussing the treatment for drug users, how some end up in prison or on the streets and that there was 14,518 registered opiate users in Ireland and roughly 29 Detox beds mostly in Dublin to cover the whole country. I recall saying to him *"Isn't there loads of beds in all the treatment centres?"* And he replied *"Yes Valerie, but not all of them provide detox. Detoxification and rehabilitation are two very different things; some services provide both, but generally to get into a residential treatment centre, drug users must be off all drugs except prescription medicines, and this may require a medical detox preferably in an appropriate detoxification unit."* I remember thinking, *Oh yeah, sure in my last treatment centre I was told to be detoxed before admission but with the other one, I could stagger in legless!* So I said to him *"So you're saying there are 14,518 opiate Users and only about 29 opiate specific detox Beds? How are they supposed to get into rehab if they can't get detoxed? Surely some would be dead before they got a chance to get a detox bed?"* To which he replied, *"Yes, some die, but the rest just have to wait or try to detox at home or just continue using until a place becomes available at a clinic."* I just could not believe my ears. I thought, *surely he must be wrong! We live in a country where we have a relatively good healthcare system, and the HSE would never let anyone die! If they knew, people were waiting for a detox.* Right there and then I decided I was going to do something about this. I wasn't sure how I could do it, but trying was better than doing nothing! And I said to Sean Foy, *"Well that won't do, and I will do something about this!"* I'm sure he thought; *Jesus this one's four weeks into a training course and now she is opening a detox centre.*

But what he said was; *"That's great Valerie, it 's hard to get these things going but if you need any help, let me know. I would be glad to point you in the right direction."* I thanked him and then said *"Sean, there is one thing that you must know about me, and that is... I always get what I want!"* He just smiled and said, *"I have no doubt you do!"* And that was the start of the work I do today. I have never looked back and still train in the Learning curve institute.

During the whole course, I was given work to do and research. This was the first time I ever did research, but Sean explained the best way to do it and once I got started nothing was holding me back. At this point, I had to go to an internet café, so I started putting money to one side to buy a laptop. They were expensive back then, so I knew it would take a while. All my assignments were sent in hand written. I think Sean didn't know what to make of being given hand written work, but he didn't say anything to me as he was aware that I had no money for a computer.

I went on to study much at the Learning Curve Institute, and I have had several tutors. All shared the same vision, passion and drive as Sean does and I am grateful for the chance of an education along with the follow-up support. Several years ago, passing exams was just a fantasy to me, now's its real and I love it! The Learning Curve Institute changed and is still changing my life. The team there gave me a new perspective on recovery, mental health and what addiction is REALLY all about. It's not just the facts, figures and evidence-based treatment I have learned from the team, I also learned how to work with different ideas, cultures, societies and that we are all human and have a right to live as we see fit without prejudice,

judgment, and sin. Before I came to the learning curve, I realized that the world I used to live in, although a nice cosy place, was closed, segregated and influenced by money, power and how educated you were.

Dual Diagnosis

During my course with the Learning Curve Institute, I had lots of research to do. I'm thinking; *Hang on! If people like me who get depression can start drinking because of it, then maybe there are more people out there with alcohol addictions caused by depression?* According to Sean Foy, alcohol is a depressant and can cause depression, and depression can cause alcohol and drug problems.

Hmm...I might be on to something here. Wouldn't it be cool if I discovered a new type of addiction just because I connected the dots? Surely someone must have noticed this before me?

Well, yes. Someone did notice before me, and my bubble burst on the 20th April 2010 when I Googled the words "Alcoholism and Depression Treatment in Ireland" there was "*Dual Diagnosis Ireland' a registered Irish charity.*" Their website looked like a book on my symptoms. I learned Dual Diagnosis was and is hardly ever treated in Ireland and lots of people, like me, slipped through the gaps and are misdiagnosed.

I emailed Dual Diagnosis Ireland and told them I was opening a treatment centre for people with addictions and mental health problems in the west of Ireland. I still had a confidence drawback and didn't think important people like them would be interested in hearing what I had to say, but I got a wonderful email back that gave me another shove along to the project. When Louise and I met Carol Moore, Angela Moore and Eoin Stephens at the Dual Diagnosis workshop I thought, "*Maybe I'm way out of my league here. They're all psychotherapists, accountants, and counsellors; I've only got as far as being an addict!*" But I was pleasantly surprised to see they were very interested in what I was doing and were willing to go to any lengths to help. I couldn't believe my luck! People with real big educations giving *ME* their time - it must be my Mayo charm! It sure as hell wasn't my outstanding general knowledge and stunning good looks!

Later, I met with Carol privately and got to have a great chat with her. She is a very kind, gentle lady and what I call "pocket size with punch" due to her petite, slender figure coupled with a tremendous knowledge of Dual Diagnosis, psychology, and business. She explained how what happened to me, happens to many other people. No data are available for Ireland but in England, research shows that most individuals with an alcohol problem also have some kind of mental health issue.¹ I was not some sort of strange and unusual case. The fact that I had alcohol problems together was totally normal and should nearly be expected by the people treating me.

Because, addiction used to be seen as some kind of personal weakness and failing, addiction services developed entirely separately and people don't see what appears to me to be an obvious link between substance abuse and mental health problems, even though addiction is listed as a mental health problem in the psychiatrist's bible - the DSM.²

Although it is changing, I think it's a fair comment to suggest GP's are not fully trained in mental health and addiction issues, so often they don't know how to

treat people with dual diagnosis problems.³ But at least they have some training and they are regulated by the Medical Council. Psychiatric nurses are regulated by the Nursing Board. But for the moment, until formal regulation becomes a reality, anybody, even somebody with no training at all, can call themselves a therapist or counsellor, work in an addiction service and they are not regulated by any government agency.

Worse still, while inpatient mental health services are regulated by the Government and are inspected by the Inspector of Mental Health every single year, there is no government regulation of inpatient addiction services or even addiction services in the community. So, there is no formal Government check or control to make sure that addiction services are providing a good service.⁴

The Government gives money to fund these services. So the Controller and Auditor General did a special report, calling for significant improvements in these services which have not yet happened.

I learned how addiction services don't have the same way as the medical world of measuring the evidence to see how well the person is recovering from their problems. So the problem of Dual Diagnosis goes unnoticed and untreated.

I was shown an article where an Irish Psychiatrist described how integrated treatments work better and cost less, but still concluded that addiction should not be treated by mental health services unless the person was basically washed up and on their last legs.⁵

I learned how services which do not address mental health and addiction problems have a treatment success rate of 30% to 50%. But, services that address these problems together have a treatment success rate of 80%.⁶

I couldn't believe that, with the current economic recession and all these cut backs, so much money is still being wasted in these services providing treatments that have less chance of working with people just getting lost in the services.

From Dual Diagnosis Ireland, I learned all about what exactly Dual Diagnosis is, how it's treated with integrated treatments and how in other countries treatment is more successful. Angela and Carol gave me loads of 'evidence based' information and statistics for me to read and start. This was my first real eye opener and lesson on the way treatment for addicts are given in Ireland, and it shook me to my very core.

Finding out that the powers that be - they already have known and possibly been taught about Dual Diagnosis, yet no integrated treatment was offered to me really cut me up. I wasn't sure what to do with myself. I thought *How could this happen? Did my life matter to addiction service providers? Did the future of my family matter? Was I just a drunk woman worth only primary treatment because it was expected that I would never recover anyway? Was I worthless because I was middle class and had a medical card? I was told in my last rehab my chances of recovery were at only 20%. Did this have something to do with that? Why are centers funded that don't give all options of treatment? And why wasn't I told about Dual Diagnosis until I was in recovery?*

I started to wonder what my worth to the Government was. Before I became an addict, when I was employed, I was a good mother and did my share in my community doing paid and voluntary work. I never caused trouble or had the Gardai

on my door, so surely when I became mentally ill, it would stand to reason that I would get the care I needed so I could go back out into my community and be useful again. I guess I thought that's what living in Ireland and being Irish meant! We're not some kind of under-developed country which can't look after its own people. The deal was you did your part; you paid taxes and then when you became ill and vulnerable, you would be looked after properly, so you could return to your life and your family and community.

It took some weeks for me to come to terms with this information and I spent a lot of time going from the bed to the couch, crying, eating and generally feeling worthless. A burden on the government! When I felt that I was a burden on my family, I could understand why. I knew it was because of my behaviour but feeling like you are a burden to the people in Dail Eireann, the very individuals who are employed to protect me and that were told about Dual Diagnosis, but they never enforced integrated treatments into centers. Did it really matter if I too was lost in the services? What difference would my life make to the world?

After the tears came the anger. Ten years of my life, ten long, hard, suffering, painful, exhausting years had been taken from my family and me by depression and addiction. A lot of that happened in this story could have been avoided. Me begging to die, my children hurting, crying, distressed. My husband is so broke and beaten. No one really knows if he will ever recover and my parents frightened out of their skins, thinking they would have to bury another child. All for nothing, nothing at all. The government knew about Dual Diagnosis yet CHOOSE to do nothing! I felt, so God damn betrayed that the pain became physical, bubbling up from my stomach to my head.

I had no choice but to gather myself together, move forward and to be honest. Finding this out only added fuel to the fire that was already burning inside me I was a bitch from hell and wanted to kick, scream and scratch the eyes out of the people who were responsible for letting my children live in a house like that when it could have been avoided. But there was no point in that, if I wanted things to change, then I would have to change them. I needed to surround myself with people who were fighting for change and start up a service, mainly a service for mothers like me who were suffering from depression and being treated for addiction. So now, I'm on a mission to make sure what happened to my family and me does to happen to anyone else.

Thomas Farragher

Thomas' Statement

19 years ago Valerie became ill. We knew nothing about depression and she hid it very well. I did notice she was "falling behind" and not as active as she used to be, but she was doing a lot, and I had continued working away.

When the drinking became troublesome, I began to wonder what the hell was wrong with her. Before that, there wasn't a thing she couldn't take on. She was accomplished, coping with anything, enjoyed life and all the excitement and challenges that went with it. I never thought in a million years I would not be able to trust her with the safety of our children, our money or to be alone at home.

When the treatment started it was difficult for me; she went off to treatment, and I was left to clean up the mess, repay all the debt she incurred, comfort and take care of the children, try to run the house, manage the farm and work a full-time job. I don't know how I did it, but I did. I got a lot of help from Valerie's mother and my sister-in-law next door, but it wasn't the same as having Valerie here with us. As bad as it was, she often had good spells, and we all hoped and prayed that was the end.

I have to say I was a little concerned when the addiction treatment centre started talking about "diseases" and addicts having to relearn how to live. Other than the drinking, I didn't think she had to be re-taught anything. Why re-teach her diseased brain? Had she suddenly forgot how to do anything? She was sick, not stupid!

The first place seemed nice, but she was gone for ages for them to "work" on her. She seemed happy there, and the staff was very kind and considerate to the kids and me. I went through hell with Siobhan, she was very young and refused to go to school because she wanted her mother at home; it was really hard for me to concentrate at work and when I was home, I found it hard to sleep at night. But after Valerie finished her treatment she seemed to get sicker and sicker. I was getting more concerned. She was still doing the A.A thing and was all right for a while and then suddenly she would 'go on the piss', often when she was needed most. When she drank it broke my heart watching her, I was so fucking mad I wanted to kill her. I was afraid she would commit suicide or hurt one of the kids, thank God for Edwina. But somehow I knew it wasn't Valerie inside that body. It felt like some other person was controlling her thoughts and actions, even her voice and she was a stranger to me. I said this to every casualty doctor and counsellor but I was still told "*She has a disease. When she stops drinking, it will get better.*" I always replied "*But she can stop drinking! Sometimes, even for months but then starts again. There is something else wrong with her*" I felt like a fool, so I eventually stopped saying it.

When she went to the last centre, I was weary, bone tired and almost broke. I had some hope about the food addiction thing and thought "*Ok, well they have a point, it might be right*" but somehow I knew deep down I was wasting time. Valerie heard it was the best place, so I said "ok." What happened there was horrible. The only thing I can say is the counsellor bullied Valerie and then made me and the kids bully her. I was told to throw her out if she drank again! The aftercare experience was something for me that I can only describe as torture. I was told if I didn't attend Valerie would drink again and even though the group was nice it's not my thing, and

I felt sick for two days before each session, but I went because I wanted her to get well.

In the mental health place, I met her psychiatrist, counsellor, and nurses. They were different and said it was no one's fault, and she was depressed; this made her drink. These felt more like the right answers; they even said I was right all those years when I was saying there was something else wrong. When she started going to those AWARE meetings, the light came back in her eyes and although it took years for me to trust her not to drink again, I had good feeling things were going to change. At least she wasn't 'cracked in the head' anymore. We all went to an AWARE meeting one night and met one of the group facilitators, and she explained everything about depression and all the stuff that goes wrong but that it can be put right, and it's possible to live a happy, fulfilled life with it. We all felt like a huge weight had been lifted, and I would recommend all families to do it if you have someone in AWARE.

When I found out that she had depression all along the guilt nearly killed me. I felt I should have fought for her more; I was the husband and father, and my job is to protect my wife and children, and I had allowed this to happen. Of course, I know now I shouldn't feel this way, but I am the one that has to carry that for the rest of my days and "*knowing it wasn't my fault*" doesn't help. This is a terrible burden for any husband and father to carry.

I think anyone who has a drinking problem needs to get mental health care. Valerie and I are now living a normal life with everyday ups and downs. I will never forget the terrible things that happened to all of us and I'm glad Valerie is helping others. I would hate any other family to suffer as we did.

T.J Farragher

I would like to dedicate this chapter to my beloved Grandad Thomas Farragher
1939-2012

I miss your cuddles

TJ'S book

I was born in Galway University hospital on a cold November morning. My Dad told me he was there. I have four sisters and no brothers. I don't really remember anything about my Mum's drinking except one story. It involved a Vodka bottle and a microwave, but first, let me introduce you to my family.

Grandad

My Grandad lived next door. Every day after school, we would run into Granddad's house. He would always give me a few euros to spend in the local shop and always gave me a banana before I could leave the house. As he started to get older his eyesight wasn't very good, and when he saw my sisters he would often playfully shout "Which one are you?!?" Anytime we walked into the sitting room; the TV would be on full blast to Judge Judy, and he always told me to "Mind you Head, a gra!" I miss him every day.

Mum

I have heard loads of other stuff about Mum's drinking because the others always skit her and tease her about some of it, but Mum also talks to other people on the phone for ages and ages. She says "Mental health this, mental health that, blah, blah, think for yourself, I know how you feel, blah." It's a wonder she doesn't talk in her sleep! I hate it when she goes to visit her ladies because she is gone till very late at night. She says it's because some of them have to work during the day, and she can only see them at night. Mum and I get on very well; she is kind to me but always asking for kisses and hugs, and that's annoying 'cause I just want to play. Mum knows all the best movies, and when Dad goes out at the weekend, we have a movie night, with popcorn and everything. She cooks nice dinners if Dad isn't cooking and she buys my favourite things to eat when she goes shopping.

Dad

I like to spend time with my Dad. We are the only boys in the house. He is always going somewhere, and if he can, he brings me with him. Dad teaches me lots of stuff, like how to drive a tractor, a digger, a quad, the jeep, all about farming, how to look after cattle and sheep, and all about car engines.

He said the house would have all seven of us in it at Christmas, and five of them are women, and the best thing to do is "*keep my head down and agree with everything.*" when he said that Mum shouted at him and said "*Thomas don't be teaching him stuff like that!*" and Dad said "*ha I'm only joking*" but he winked at me, and I knew he meant it!

I love spending time with Dad, especially every Sunday night. He often watches Top Gear and Country file, and I sit in, what we all call the cubby hole. The cubby hole is when Dad sits in the big arm chair, and I snuggle into the crook of his arm. Dad tells me if I treat women with respect I will live a long and happy life if I don't God help me!

Elaine

My oldest sister Elaine lives in England. She used to live in Galway, and that was real fun for me because I got to go to her house most weekends, and she used to bring me to rugby matches, the arcade, shopping and for hot chocolate with one of the best doughnuts you could ever find! She spoiled me rotten 'because she used to work in a clothes shop and buy me all the coolest clothes there ever were. She is coming home as well this Christmas.

Louise

Another one of my sisters, Louise lives in Australia with her boyfriend Darren, he is funny and plays football with me whenever he can. I miss Louise. It makes me sad because they are coming home for Christmas but then leaving me again to go back to Australia. She always used to bring me to the cinema to watch the best movies that were out. My favourite movie I've seen with Louise was 'Pirates of the Caribbean.' I miss going for spins in the car and cycling round the village with her. I can't wait to see her in December. I am going to sleep in her bed when she comes home because Dad doesn't let boyfriends sleep over in our house, and this means I can watch morning TV in bed with Louise.

Sarah

Sarah lives in the town a few miles from me. She lives with her boyfriend Thomas. He is very kind to me and doesn't mind if I make noise or a mess. They have a dog together called Coco. Some weekends I stay over at Sarah's house. We watch movies all night. Occasionally, she brings me to Galway, and they buy me loads of clothes and toys. Once she even brought me to Dublin to visit Tayto Park. I had a really good time! I even met one of the Hardy Bucks! We also went to Build-A-Bear workshop, and I got a teddy and named him Sam.

Siobhan

Siobhan is my sister who now lives in Galway, and starting a new course. I miss her not being at home, because now I have to do some of her chores, like putting the wet clothes in the tumble dryer, sweeping the floors and doing the dishes. Siobhan tells me that she loves the sandwiches I make her. I call them 'Hamelots'. Every night, before I've gone to bed, she always reads to me. At the moment she's reading me 'The Hunger Games.' Now that she's moved out she reads it to me over the phone, sometimes I fall asleep, and she is reading while I snore!

Me

I go to the local primary school, where I'm soon going to fourth class. I sometimes walk to school, if the weather is nice, or cycle. At home, I try to entertain myself by playing on the go kart, hanging out with Dad, watching TV and play with my best dog, Bobby.

Bobby

Bobby is my dog and my very best friend in the world. I teach him tricks like sit, stay, lie down, roll over, away and come by. He tries to wake me up in the morning by licking my face which always works, but it's only because he wants to play ball. Every ball I've ever bought him ends up bursting! I always play football with him, and his favourite thing to do is play in goal. When I go anywhere, I always try to bring him with me because I miss him, but the teacher won't let me bring him into school! Mum tells me he cries when I am gone to school or out with Dad and

one day he even ran into her office looking for me and jumped on her desk, spilling her jug of water and a coffee cup all over her work. She went crazy, and now I make sure he is happy before I leave him!

School

I like school, most of the time... but hey! Who doesn't?!? My two favourite teachers' in the school are Mr. Maher and Mrs. Quigley. I like Mr. Maher because he is very nice and doesn't give out to any of us kids unless they do something terrible. He's easy to learn from, and if I ever get stuck on a question, Mr. Maher will come over straight away and help me. I like Mrs. Quigley because she's really fun to learn from. She shows us how to do hard work in an easy and fun way. In September, I am going into a new classroom and leaving Mr. Maher. I'm sad about leaving Mr. Maher, but looking forward to seeing Mrs. Burke, because I know she is a very nice teacher.

Sometimes I go to After school. I like it there because I can play with my friends and go on the Wii. I also work on the computers. There are lots of fun things to do in Afterschool. Thursday is my favourite day in after school because it's Baking day, which means I get a plate full of goodies. The two teachers that look after us are called Bernie and Assumpta. They are very kind and great fun to be around.

The Microwave

Now for my story. I can only remember one time when my Mum had gone drinking. One day, when I was at home with Mum, my Mum came rushing into the kitchen. She had a bottle in her hand. She ran over to the microwave and hid the bottle behind it. When she was leaving the kitchen she turned to me and whispered: "*Shhh, don't tell Dad where the bottle is.*" I said "*Ok*" But I thought *I better tell Dad!* Then she went upstairs to bed to hide.

Dad walked in the door a few minutes later. I was standing near the hall door, and Dad said: "Has she hid any more bottles?" I pointed over towards the microwave and said: "Ya... over there!"

And that's it. That's all I can remember. But I've heard lots of stories from my sisters and my Mum. Some of them sound really scary and unbelievable. I find it hard to believe that my Mum would do such stupid things. But they tell me she was sick at the time, and that's why she did those silly things. I don't worry about her drinking; I doubt she will because of all the work she is doing.

My future

I want to go to Mountbellew or UCD in Dublin to study agricultural science. Then I want to travel to America and Australia to learn how farms are run in other countries so I can bring back new ideas and use them on my own farm. I want to be just like my Dad. Going to the Mart every Wednesday and having the banter around McHugh's Sandwiches. Dad says McHugh's Ham Sandwiches are the best in the world, and we always eat one each when we go there, along with a big mug of tea. And I always get a chocolate bar.

Sarah Farragher

Before

My name is Sarah. I'm the third and middle child of my family. And, my God, do I know it! I would most definitely call myself the black sheep of the family. For example, I remember once, when I was about fourteen years of age, my two older sisters and I was sitting in the kitchen one night, and they thought it would be funny to convince me that I was the Postman's daughter. And as I was always told and always felt different from the rest of the family, I half-heartedly thought it might be true. Unfortunately, it happened to be a Saturday night, which meant, Dad was down at the local having a few pints, and came in shortly after the slagging had started. Once my Father came in the door, one of my sisters said, "Isn't that true Dad? That Sarah is the Postman's daughter." To which he replied, "This wasn't the right time to tell her, but yeah, it's true!" Like always being the youngest of the teenage girls, I was always the butt of the joke and took things to heart.

Shortly after my teens, I became the outsider of the family. I always wanted to be different from the rest of my family. I always wanted to be more.

Before Mum started drinking, there were only a few things I can remember. Like singing to me at night 'Good Night Mr. Moon' still to this day, whenever I think of her rubbing my cheek and singing softly to me, I start to cry. I did also remember when I was sick one night from an ear infection; she stayed up all night with me rubbing my head while we watched Ms. Doubtfire. That is the Mum I wish stayed. But what I remember most from my childhood is my sisters and England.

The summer before we moved into the new house, that summer, we were shipped off to England to my Mum's family where our grandparents bought us new clothes and shoes. It was after the summer when we arrived back in Ireland, and moved into the new house, that Mum's drinking got worse.

When the Drinking Started

The first incident I remember of my Mother's drinking was being in the mobile home that we lived in for a while as our new house in the Neale was being built. She went into town to get a surprise for us. She told us we were going to have a 'Girly Night In' (Which, I now know, was a cover up for her to go drinking). She came in the door of the mobile home hiding something behind her back. She told us to guess what it was. I knew Titanic was not out for one more week, but as much as she said it was not Titanic, I would not stop shouting, as loud as I could, "Titanic! Titanic!" After a few minutes, she gave in and said: "Yes, it's Titanic!" And we all went to bed to watch it.

Once the movie was over, my sisters and Mother were crying. They couldn't understand why I was not crying, (as I was only nine years old and didn't realise that this was based on actual events.) So, when my Mother told me that all of the kids actually died at the end of the film, I believed her and could not stop crying and then once I did, we watched it again. I now understand that she was just really drunk and was meant to say, "This movie was made because this actually happened long ago and lots of people died, not the actors in the film." Then, halfway through

the second round of the movie, my Mother rolled over on the bed and got sick (from drink), but she told us that she had eaten too much and as a nine-year-old, I believed her and never even questioned it.

Then, things got worse. I was only about ten years old when we moved into the new house, and that's when Mum told us that she had a drinking problem. When I say my Mother said to me - what actually happened was I was in the hallway, and I heard my Mother say to someone on the phone that she was an alcoholic too, but instead of sitting me down like any right Mother and trying to explain that she was an alcoholic what she did was send my two sisters to tell me. When Elaine and Louise came to me later (I want to make a point of showing that I knew more than them) they said: "We have something to tell you." So, I said "What? Is this about Mum being an alcoholic?!" and their faces dropped. I was so pleased with myself that I got one over on them. Looking back now, it just showed that I really didn't know what an alcoholic was nor did I know how it was going to turn my life upside down. My point is that with most families the drinker has to tell you most of the time that the drinking is gone too far before the family sees a real problem.

I remember one hot summer's day when Mum told us she had another surprise for us. She loaded us up in the car, and we headed off to the lake. When we landed there, she unpacked a picnic, and we went off playing in the water. When Louise and I came out of the water, we went over to Mum. Mum had clearly been drinking the whole time we were in the water but when I said "Mum you're drunk" she just slurred "No, no I'm not." I then looked at Louise and said: "Yes, she is." But Louise said, "No, she is not!" But while all this was going on Mum rolled over on the sheet and got sick. Like always, I got mad and started to give out saying things like "Why, Mum?!" Shortly after that, we packed up our stuff, the sick covered sheet and we all left.

On the way home from the lake the roads were mostly one way and Mum could probably see two of everything, so we found the drive home a bit hard with all the swerving. She then told us that we would pop into Mary's (a long time friend of mum). On the way back she said she was just going to park the car and would be right back, so we all headed in with Siobhan. As the hours passed, Mary started to get worried because she was gone so long.

We later found out that Mum knew she would be in trouble for drinking and driving with the kids in the car, and she knew Dad would be furious. So, in fear she drove herself to a rehab center. We don't know how she managed to get there in one piece, because of the distance. What I didn't know at the time was Mary and Dad spent the rest of the day looking for her.

When I was in secondary school, I would spend most of my time thinking, *Will she be drinking when I get home? Will T.J be okay?* I can't explain this feeling but the moment that my feet would hit the ground coming off the bus, I could always tell if she was drinking or not. I never said anything to my sisters for the first while when I would get this feeling, but as time went on, I would see that every time I thought she was drinking she normally would be. Most days, I would tell my sisters if Mum was drinking or not.

I always had a gut feeling about her drinking. It often turned out to be true. After a while, they would ask me before we stepped foot in the door if Mum was

drinking or not? Thinking back now it was pointless as we had to go into the house anyway and would be better not knowing just for that minute as we would have a peace of mind. Times, when she would drink, would be the time you really needed her not to. Times like The Leaving Cert results, family events, such as birthdays, etc.

When Mum would drink, it was like Dr. Jeckel and Hyde. She would have this look in her eyes as if to say, "Fuck you, I'm going to make you pay," without ever opening her mouth.

I remember a time when she was lying in bed, and I was shouting at her because she got me into trouble with my Dad by telling him stories about me. (This was usually to get herself out of trouble and focus all the attention on me). I called her everything that came to mind, "Bitch, fat lazy." Then, she rolled over on the bed, just about able to put one word in front of the other and said: "I wish you died when I was in labor with you, I wish I never had you!" All the while my little sister was lying next to her, and then Mum passed out.

Those words cut me deep. I remember thinking, "Why me? Why do I have to have a Mother like this? Why can't I be like my friend's families and have a Mum that cooks dinner, cleans the house and picks us up from school, makes us lunch, washes our clothes and helps us with our homework?" It was not so much Mum being drunk that pissed me off; it was the fact that the whole house would fall apart and fight when she would drink. I would not cry, I would not hide away, I would 'flip my lid' and try and be the mother of the house. I would go mad cleaning and trying to cook and do my homework all at the same time. Needless to say, it couldn't be done all by one person. So, I would start shouting at everyone to "Fucking help me!" My Father would always complain about the house being 'filthy.' It looked like a "Pigsty", as my Father would say! He also told us to marry rich as we would need maids. I still have my fingers crossed on that one! As I'm sure he does too! After all, it is the Father of the bride that is meant to pay for the wedding, and he does have four girls!

The last time Mum went in (as I would say after lots of failed attempts); I never thought for one second that this would be it. That she would never drink again, and I was not afraid to voice my feelings about it. My family would give out to me and say, "God sake, Sarah. Just give her a chance!" But, I had believed in her before, so I was not going to set myself up for that. Not again.

When we were in rehab (again, I say 'we' as it is not just the person that is going through it, it is the whole family as well). We were put into categories. I was the scapegoat. I took this on board and thought this was how I was to act. This comes from where people use to put rocks on the back of a goat and run it out of the town. The rocks represent their problems. So, it meant that my family would put all their problems on me.

I get what it means now. I love to help people, even if it puts me out (well, maybe not LOVE helping, more like, can help but feel I need to. This was apart from my family.) I would try to help them and always get told to keep out, that they don't want or need it. So, I don't bother anymore as it always ends in a fight. Anyway, like I was saying, I never believed she would stop that time, and I was right. She didn't. And I still believe to this day; *it is only a matter of time before she drinks again.* I know this is wrong, but I can't help but feel this way. I feel like, if I never think that this is the last time, then I won't be hurt again.

Now

Now that she has been sober for so long, I would like to say we are close, like best friends or even like mother and daughter, but sadly, we are not. Still to this day, I feel like she is trying to get out of the mother role. I would just like it if I was able to have a cup of coffee or tea with her without thinking about the past instead of looking forward to the future like everyone else. I knew that I have to work on that myself to get us to a place where we can talk openly to each other. I'm somehow still half-afraid that the drink will come back, and this means I will be hurt again. So I keep my distance from her, as I always feel she has let me down, by sometime's not going through or backing out of plans.

I feel that she is now so involved in her work that she now has little time for me. I feel like, now that she is sober, that we should be spending all the time we can together to make up for the time lost during her drinking. I know this is selfish as I am grown up and have left the house but, how can you make up for that time? It is gone. I have to move on and try and build a proper mother-daughter relationship with her. I always feel like she has every excuse to getting out of being a good mother as when she had us she was so young she didn't really know what she was doing. Then she was drinking and when she was not drinking she would always go on about how well she was doing as if she was constantly defending herself.

To be truthful, I am really asking too much of her. What I want is only real in movies, but you can't help the way you feel. Every time I look at her, I should feel proud of what she has done, but really all I want is a mother that cooks, cleans and is 'normal.' I've even asked her "Why can't you be normal?" To which she would simply reply. "There's no such thing as 'normal,' Sarah." I always felt that this was a 'cop out.'

Now, I know that even "normal" families can be just as fucked up as us. But they hide it better. It all comes out in the end. SHIT HAPPENS!

Elaine Farragher

Elaine Farragher

Right, my name's Elaine. I am the eldest of five children. My place in the family was decided by the last rehab my mother attended. I was labelled, "THE CLOWN." This means I don't take things seriously, offering a joke instead of comfort. The school wasn't easy having an alcoholic mother. Well, nothing is really, but I sometimes didn't go in or went home early, and my friends knew full well what was going on, but to an outsider, I might have just looked like a Dosser.

Mum started drinking when I was in Primary school, but it hadn't affected me until secondary school. Then the phone calls started, and I had to go home to watch her. It was annoying in one way because I felt the need to lie to the teachers for a while about it, and I don't know why because had I been straight with them they might have been more helpful, or a little more understanding as to why I hadn't stuff done for them.

On a terrible occasion, we ended up in the psychiatric ward. This was when I witnessed firsthand the massive flaws in the system, and I personally think my mother's future and what she's doing in it now stemmed from this very occasion.

Intercom "Elaine Farragher, please go to the General office, thank you." I hear a few people whispering that I wouldn't be back and that I was always getting out of class. They apparently didn't understand that I would rather be in school hanging out with my friends out the back than dealing with a drunk for the day. I gathered up my stuff as I knew once I went to the office I would be told to go home and at least this way I could just grab my bag and duck out. There was nothing worse than lingering and feeling the eyes burning into the back of my head!

Walking the halls I see some friends in their computer class and wave violently, to which I'm greeted by a sour-faced teacher who slams the door in my face. I laugh to myself, and it's a moment of a distraction from what I know is about to happen. The halls are empty, and the only sound was the shuffling of my feet. I had a feeling she would go drinking this morning when I left. Sometimes you just knew, you would get a twist in your stomach and know it was gonna be a long day.

"Hey Maria, I believe you paged me. Was it Edwina?"

"Nope Elaine, it was your Dad. You have to go home." She looks away on the second part of the message like she's embarrassed for me.

"Sound. Is someone coming to pick me up?" I ask her.

"Yeah, so you have time to get your stuff and remember to sign out, you forgot the last time."

"Sorry, I'm a scatter brain, you know that," I half laugh, and leave the office. For the life of me, I can't remember how I got home. Sometimes a Taxi was sent for me, or a neighbour came to collect me. In later years Louise, the sister next to me, drove so she would often sort out Mum when I left home and went to Galway in 2007.

I entered my parent's room to the smell of Vodka and sour milk, which as you can image even being sober wasn't the most appealing aroma you could have a room contain. I don't see the Vodka bottle right off, and I have a funny feeling she bought two. She had started buying extra because she would be too hung over to get

another bottle and the off-licences' had stopped giving me the drink. In those days, there was an actual point that Mum would ring an off-licence, and I could pick it up. That was way too much power to give to a Teen. It just goes to show how easy it was to get your hands on the drink in rural areas. Is it any wonder we had problems with alcohol when all I needed was a grown up to call and say her daughter was collecting her wine?

"Elaine, I think I might have food poisoning. I have been getting sick all day..." I roll my eyes and hand Mum a pint of water and go back out to the kitchen. I know Dad's not going to be home for ages, so I take a cigarette from the box left on the table and have a cup of tea. I had been smoking since I was fifteen, and often Mum bought them for me, mainly as a bribe. I had made most of my friends through smoking and once you have connections like that it's hard to quit; it's what binds you together, so I couldn't understand why Mum needed the booze so badly. She would often fall asleep cradling the bottle like a baby, which is a heartbreaking sight by anyone's standards. I hear shuffling and Mum's throwing up then she trudges into the kitchen as white as a sheet and clammy with sweat.

"I have to go to the hospital. Please call a Taxi." She is holding onto a few items, apparently expecting to wait the night. She doesn't seem to have a lot of stuff with her, but I put it in a bag for her anyway.

"Fine, I will call a taxi. Just sit down and don't drink anymore for fucks sake." The taxi driver beeped outside shortly after. I'm not even sure if we paid, or Dad had to sort him out. Most people in the village knew, especially the woman in the shop who must have been in between a rock and a hard place every time she saw my Mother coming in to get her fix and put it on her tab! Hundreds were racked up on that tab as she would never buy just the vodka; she would buy loads of other crap as well. The taxi ride is a blur of my Mother telling the taxi driver she might have food poisoning, but he knows very well she's just hammered drunk.

We get to the hospital, and Mum approaches reception as soberly as she can and asks to see someone about a detox. The nurse looks a bit puzzled but clearly twigs what my Mother is after. "You will be seen by the triage, go sit." It's not that long before we're pointed to the triage room and a nurse sees Mum, who is reluctant to allow me in at first, but Mum tells her it's fine and that she wants another person there to hear everything in case she forgets. I think the nurse can smell the drink and starts putting two and two together.

"There's not much we can do I'm afraid, this isn't a rehab."

"Please, can't I get a drip or something!" I could hear the panic in my mother's voice now.

"We can do a few tests," the nurse replies gently. At this point, I am feeling ill myself as I hate seeing blood been taken, Mum knows this and smiles. The nurse leaves and my Mum says; "They will sort me out, Elaine and I will be much better." I don't know how many times I had heard that before, and it still didn't feel any different to any other time. It was hours before Mum was put on a trolley at this point and she looks relieved. The Nurse (one of those rough and ready old school types) came in and roughly put up a drip and handed her a sick bag.

I can understand her frustration with my Mother; there are people who are gravely ill and she's taken a trolley up looking to clean out her system. It's clear she

didn't want to make small talk with my mother and said the Doctor would be around shortly. I laugh uncontrollably at the shape of the sick bag. It's got a hard plastic ring and a bag attached. I tell Mum it looks like a condom for a large horse, she laughs and then grabs her stomach "Ouch; my stomach is in bits." At this point in my life, I didn't know the agony of hangovers or the real internal effects of top shelf spirits.

A tall black doctor returns and is as vague as you can get. To his credit it's hard not to say; "You're not hospital ill, you're hammered so get lost we have really ill patients here to see." But he approaches the bed and continues, "Mrs. Farragher; everything seems fine, but the nurse told me you want to go to the psychiatric ward?!"

"Yes please, I just need some help getting sober; I can't go back to rehab," she says, frantically. He flicks through his notes and hums to himself.

"Right I will call the psychiatric department and see what they can do." My Mother begins to fall asleep, and I eavesdrop on the patients either side of me and listen to a fascinating story of an affair going on in someone's area and quickly realise if I can hear them then they can hear us. I didn't want the curtains pulled back; I didn't need to see sad eyes as my Mother is shipped off to the psychiatric ward, luckily they had left before someone came for Mum. Don't get me wrong. If people needed to know about her, I didn't mind telling them, but I was tired and didn't want to entertain anyone in conversation. People tend to judge quickly and think: *Once a drunk, always a drunk. She was a drain on her family and the medical system.* I can't say there weren't times I didn't think the same about my Mother, but when you get so frustrated by something you don't fully understand it's hard not to think the worst.

I am not proud of having such negative thoughts towards her, but anyone who has dealt with addiction would say the same. The Porter wheeling my Mum didn't say much. I'm sure at the best of times it's hard to make conversation with ANYONE going to the psychiatric ward. I smile and make a comment about the weather to break the ice, but it's no go! I guessed that he could smell the drink off my Mother, and he probably knew himself it was a waste of time being here. We wait in a large reception, and I pull out some of my school books, trying to make the most of the quiet of the room...I spoke too soon. My phone starts going off, and it's Dad.

"Ed called me and said you went to the bloody hospital. What is it this time?!" My Dad is clearly frustrated, and it's not helped by having a full-time job which means that he cannot leave work and help out at home.

"I didn't know what to do, ok?! She probably won't get a bed anyway." There is a moment of silence; then he continues; "Call me when ye get home ok. WAIT, who brought ye?" I pause.

"Hmm...taxi," I tell him, knowing it was more money spent, and he wouldn't be happy. "Another fucking bill I suppose! Fine. Listen, good luck. Call me later." By the time someone talks to Mum it's getting dark. Earlier on, I receive a few other phone calls about who is looking after my sisters and collecting the younger ones from Primary school. It becomes part of life when you come from a home with an addict, and everyone seems to take it on the chin.

Hours later, I had finished my English homework, and Mum was still sitting like a bold child waiting for punishment. She looked more hopeful than normal, but I didn't. I always knew not to get over excited because I knew a doctor would come in and say that Mum didn't fit the description for someone to get a bed, or that she would have to get medication from her own doctor. The doctor comes out with the news that I knew was coming, but I think Mum thought that because she had got this far, they would keep her and hide her from drink until she would finally be able to get sober.

"I am sorry, but there is nothing we can do for you Mrs. Farragher, you just don't fit the description." Mum is extremely upset by this. *I thought the reason a person came to such a section in a hospital is if you needed help and she was practically kicking the door down asking for it.* The doctor seems genuinely upset that he can't offer any more help. He tries to explain to Mum why she can't stay, but Mum's heard it all before time and time again. He continues, "We can't just take someone in like it's a detox ward. You would be occupying a bed and time away from patients who need it more." With that, we leave and head out for a cigarette and Mum explains herself to another woman in the smoking area. I don't think the woman had any idea what Mum was on about in fairness.

"It's always, 'Come back when you're sober', or 'Sorry you're not mentally ill.' How can I get some help? It's not fair Elaine; it's just not fair!" I know it's walloped her, this time. She sobs, but I can't feel much for her, due to my own frustration and just being tired of the same shit always happening. I didn't agree with a lot that AA had to offer, but I still use the serenity prayer when I feel like I can't go on. This prayer was adopted by AA, and they say it at the end of a meeting. I think it's nice and can be put into any bad position in life.

Mother before drink

I am the eldest of the five children, so being this I had the advantage of having a good memory of my mum before alcoholism took over her life. She was the kind of mother that gave us melted cheese on crackers before bed. Thanks for the Nightmares, MOM! She was involved in the local play school, would help organize fundraisers and such. My sisters and I would play for hours on end in the back of fields, taking all her pots and pans to make a house and driving her to distraction.

My fondest memory and the best way to describe her and the way she was was when my sisters and I tried making a pool out the back of the house! We had a rockery and a spell of bad weather. I could see water under some of the rocks and got a bright idea.

"Hey, if we pull up these rocks we can fill the hole with water from the hose." I said to Louise (Second eldest.)

"Ok, I'll get Sarah and a hose. This is gonna be great!" What we didn't realize is that under the rocks was just wet soil and what we created could only be described as a big muddy, wet hole that we played in any way. We clearly were not very lady like children and happily got muddy, but that's farm life for ya. Mum called us for dinner and got her three daughters at the door COVERED from head to toe in mud, and she laughed. Then, her face dropped, and she promptly led us outside and took a hose to us. If you are done something like that now, you would probably have the social after ya. It wasn't that nice. The water was cold, so we knew not to do that

again in a hurry! But that was the way she was, hands on and we had great fun with her going on walks and all that kind of stuff that comes along in Farm life.

I have so many stories like these; some things that only my family would really understand or indeed people from the countryside. I just want to make sure that if you're reading this and already know my mother's story that you are aware that there was a lovely mother before alcohol took over. She was always the most dependable person and wasn't much of a drinker when she was in her 20s, funny enough. I never remember being a small child and seeing my Mum falling around the place drunk - that said she was frequently pregnant. I would never have thought in a million years that she would become an alcoholic and have her life, and ours turned upside down. She would go out on the weekend if a babysitter were available, which for many years was a lovely girl named Aine. Every morning after Aine would babysit us on the occasional Saturday night; we would wake up to discover a penny sweet underneath our pillows. It was like her signature trademark. She has since tragically passed away.

Mother during the drinking years

As I said before, I was always the one who just made light of the issues and was more like my Mother's pal than daughter at the best of times. This often resulted in petty name calling and being branded 'Mummy's favorite.' I guess I didn't see the point in everyone ganging up on her. In the last two years of her drinking, she was regularly drunk, and you can't argue with a drunk! Even if you do think you're making head way you can be sure it will be forgotten by the next day. Living with alcoholism often results in a nasty case of a domino effect. Dad would yell at us for not stopping her from drinking; we would yell at Mum for drinking and then Mum would pick a fight with Dad. One particular story I have for 'Mothers drinking years' is about our 'Girly Nights' which is where it all began.

Girly Nights, was when Mum would buy a bottle of Baileys, and we would eat junk food and watch movies. At this point we were living in a mobile home on the building site of our current home, that we still to this day call 'the cursed house.' This house seemed to be where everything really kicked off with Mum's alcoholism, and it's hard not to symbolize the home with that pain and misery. Dad would have to work away a lot to fund the building of the house. Mum would never last the movie and would usually drink the whole bottle, which we didn't really pick up on. I guess as it was at home it didn't disturb anyone. Out of sight, out of mind. Siobhan (fourth child) was a toddler and that summer my aunt was getting a divorce, and her two children came to live with us. We had two adults and SIX children in a two bedroom mobile home! That's eight people, and still to this day, I have no idea how Mum managed it all. I guess when you get put in that position you just deal with it and keep going. We couldn't change it, not at the time.

Moving to 'The cursed house' was an advantage for a small while but given all the space we now had it seemed like it only gave the alcoholism a chance to spread and infect every part of our lives. Living in the mobile my Mother's drinking was just seen as: 'Oh, she just has a drink in the evening, she's stressed with the building of the house,' to living in the house and her drinking was seen as: 'Your Mother has an alcohol problem, she needs help.' I still remember Mum and Dad sitting us down and telling us that Mum has a drinking problem. It went over my head, and I didn't really

react much. I guess I didn't know what was ahead of us all, it was a long journey of A&E visits, leaving school early and lies...

Mum was quite smart when she wanted to go drinking, and at times she was as thick as two short planks if she were worried she wouldn't get the chance to drink. There is nothing worse than fear and panic in someone who has an addiction. This became evident when she decided she wanted to go to rehab but not tell anyone! It was just a typical summer's day, and she suggested we go to Cong. We all hopped in the car, and we got as far as 'Aunt' Mary's house. We call her our Aunt even though she's not, as she has been there from birth and was more like family than my mother's childhood best friend. Cong isn't far from where we live, and it doesn't take long to get there. Myself, Louise, Sarah and a young Siobhan hopped out of the car, and Mum tells us that she's parking up, and she wouldn't be long.

"Ok, Mum. We'll go inside and see you in a few minutes." We loved Mary's house. She had winding stairs, and you had to go downstairs to get into the kitchen. It was so much cooler than our house. Well, anyone's house was better when you are young, it's just a child thing I guess.

"Is your Mother gone to the shop? I could do with some milk" Mary asked looking at the last of hers.

"You're such a scab, Mary, get your own milk," I tell her, sarcastically. "She's gone parking up. She said she wouldn't be long. She will probably go to the shop for sweets." Mary and I have this relationship where we tease each other, like a Love/Hate thing. She knew the score and had ties with addiction herself.

"Is she drinking today?" Mary half whispers, making the hand gesture of 'drinking' so as not to upset the others by the mention of drink.

"Ah no, well, you never know how the day goes." At this point of Mum's drinking, we never considered the fact she wouldn't drink at some time of the day. For some reason, whenever we went to the dentist it was a guarantee she would sneak off and buy some drink. It was really annoying as you would be in pain from the dentist and then have to listen to her go on about, whatever bothered her today.

We start playing darts and before we realise it, fifteen minutes have passed, then thirty and it hits us, she's done a runner! Fear begins to set in. We are all thinking the same thing: "What if she's killed herself!" She had gone and left us with her best friend, someone who was safe and she knew would look after us all. She had been unusually happy that morning; maybe she had made peace with her choice.

"Call your Dad, and try her phone," Mary said, quite calmly. No-one could find her. She wasn't answering her phone, and Dad was in a panic.

"Does she have any of the kids in the car?!" I can hear my Dad roaring down the phone. He was clearly still on whatever site he was working on that day.

"No, she left them here. She obviously takes off, but she never mentioned anything to the kids, and they're saying she had no drink or money on her," she told him.

"Well, at least they're safe with you. I will be there as soon as possible. Thanks, Mary," Dad replied. I could hear the panic in his voice too. After Mary hangs up we call our actual aunt, Edwina and see if she's gone back to the house, but she hasn't. At this point, everyone is waiting by the phones. We ring a few more

neighbors and family members before we start on the Hospitals. No-one wants to jump to the idea of suicide, but at that point in time, I honestly thought that maybe she ran the car off a bridge or something. I hoped she had just gone to get drunk somewhere, but she tended to drink at home, where she could go to bed and sleep and continue to drink.

Dad collects us and gets Louise to stay by the phone in case she calls, and I go with Dad in the car. We drove for quite awhile around the back roads and to places we knew she would go, but we couldn't find her. Dad is really starting to worry now and chain smoking cigarettes, you can't help but be scared if you see the strongest male role model in your life terrified.

After what felt like a day, we got a phone call from Mary, telling us Mum had gone to a rehab and checked herself in. The tension in the car lifted as my Dad hangs up the phone. "She's a selfish one, your Mother," he mumbles, furiously. "Has everyone running around after her. Fuck sake!" I stay quiet and nod in agreement. I can't help but agree. Everyone was in a hoop all evening trying to find her when all she had to do is leave a note. When we get home, plans are made again for who is doing what and child minding as Mum's gone, again! As much as a pain in the arse she was drinking, it was tough without the extra set of hands around the place.

I like the rehab Mum had gone to this time. It was a small self-run place but very religious. When my Mother went to the last rehab center, she got sober for seven months after, but being around her it was like always walking on egg shells. What they did was broke her down and attempted to build her back up to the person they wanted her to be. They told her she had a food addiction and that she had to go on special diets. They told her that if she ever had sugar, wheat or flour ever again that she would drink again! She was always scared that if she didn't follow the book she would drink or go to after-care. She wasn't the happy-go-lucky Mother we had before she was sent in, it didn't last, of course, and when she came off the wagon, she did with a massive thump.

Having a boyfriend and an ill Mother was certainly not easy. She would do silly things like text him and tell him he should marry me, or ask when were gonna have kids as she always wanted grandchildren. God love him; he had some patience for her hounding and yeah it was somewhat embarrassing. I never hid my family life and the roller-coaster ride it was, and said from the start of our relationship I wouldn't judge him if he walked. There were times I don't think he knew how hard it was gonna be and felt stuck. He would listen to me cry if I missed and worried about my little siblings and often drove me down home. He was a great guy with a great ability to bite his tongue and be the strong silent type.

My Mother Now in the present day

Now here I am, just shy of Twenty-five years old and am sitting in a Cafe drinking black coffee, as the waiter looks mean and I don't want to ask for milk. I am leaving Ireland and moving to England after a long-term relationship ended. I am really very nervous about it all but excited at the same time. It's shocking just how quickly your life can take a corner. Is any of that my Mother's fault? No. There is no family that is without stresses and strains; it's just that some families get it worse than others. Sure I could go on and cry about it but if I am to be quite honest a lot of it is becoming a fussy distant memory. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. Irish

Mammies that are dependent on alcohol and painkillers to get them through the day is NOT uncommon in Ireland; it's just not talked about. It's swept under the rug like many illnesses in this country. We have a terrible system for helping people here and maybe this book can help change that. I'm very proud to have a Mother that is willing to 'take the bullet' and speak out for those who are still living under a rock, trying to sober up on their own and driving their family mad in the process. My Mother is providing an excellent service. The woman isn't without her faults but at the end of the day she might have gone from the stereotypical Mummy that made you packed lunches and was on all the parent committees, to being a "Drunk". She has flipped her life around, and I couldn't be more proud. Despite all the tears and tantrums, rehabs, hospital visits and falling outs there is a silver lining, and it is that she's helping others the way she should have got help all those years ago. From sitting in a Psychiatric ward being told to go home to setting up an integrated community recovery service for people who simply can't stop drinking. She has had some awful times with this venture too. I just hope the people who read this don't think they might have the right to judge my family or me, as we have dealt with things the way we have and it's really not up for public debate. After all, what's done is done.

Love ya Mum, keep up the good work - child number one (Gas and air)

Siobhan Farragher

Siobhan's Story

Before

I don't remember my Mother before drink. I've only heard stories - stories of my Mother tidying the house, preparing the dinner and taking my sisters out for leisurely walks through the countryside. You know all that sentimental 'happy family' nonsense. Sadly, I was not able to experience this first hand, and I never will. Don't get me wrong; she's a great Mother ever since her recovery. She's more of a best friend to me than a demanding Mother. She always sticks up for me, gives me good advice, and has always been there for me through thick and thin. Okay, getting off course. I'll start with one of the earliest memories I have of my Mother's drinking, where it all began...The First Rehab Center.

During

Childhood

Round One

Again, I have vague memories of the first rehab center my Mother went to. I was about five years old. She went to that same rehab center three times before they moved her to The last rehab center. But more on that later. I remember tears...Tears streaming down my face as I was told my Mother was about to be 'taken away' from me for three whole months. My body goes numb, and the blood drains from my face as my whole world comes crashing down around me. It's weird how a person's mental capacity changes over the years. As a child, three months felt like three years, but as a teenager, three months seems like three days. And, as my Mother was going away for three months, as a child, that felt like forever!

I so desperately wanted to be with my Mother, like any other five-year-old child does. I cried and cried until I got my way. I was allowed to stay in the rehab center with my mother on the weekends. I know, weird huh? After school on Friday, my father would pick me up and drop me off at the center. He would stay for a little while with my mother then leave. I was able to stay Friday and Saturday night, and then when the dreaded Sunday came around for the rest of my family to visit, I had to return home and wait a whole four days before I could see my Mother again. I slept in the same room as my mum and (from what I remember) one other woman.

It was a very nice and well-kept center. The floor was covered with crimson coloured carpet, and the walls were white. It was an old building, and it seemed very religious. They had a recreation room and a TV room where I spent most of my days. Other than that, there wasn't much else for a five-year-old to do. I'm not sure how in the world my Father allowed me to stay in the center on the weekends. He gets very protective and weary when it comes to his kids. I must've put up a good fight! I spent most of my days between my Mother's room, the recreation room, and just wandering the halls for hours on end. They had plenty of board games in the center. The game I played the most was Connect-Four. To this day, I absolutely hate that game as it brings up too many memories that I've tried to repress.

I remember one particular Sunday when my family came down to visit. We went into the TV room, and watched the movie 'Home Alone'. I was sat on the red carpeted floor, while others towered over me. I remember feeling sick and scared at

the thought of going home and leaving my Mother. I thought something bad might happen to her although now I know she was perfectly safe. But as a child, my mental capacity couldn't take in what was going on. I felt like she had moved to England and that for the four days that I was separated from her, felt like months.

After my Mother had come out of the first rehab center, she stayed sober, for a while...unfortunately, it didn't last long.

Round Two

When my Mother went to the first rehab center for the second time, I couldn't bear going to school. I was still pretty young. I had just turned six years old. I would kick up a fuss every morning before going to school feeling sick to my stomach, but my body would feel numb all over. My brain is going a million miles an hour, repeating the same words, "*I don't wanna go to school!*" I wanted to be at home with my Mother, but that wouldn't be possible, at least not for another month. This time she was only asked to stay for one month which I was happy about, but still not overly fond of. Eventually, after days of crying and sulking, my Father called me out to the car where he had my Mother on a loud speaker from the rehab center. My Mother told me that I was allowed to stay at home for the month that she was staying in rehab. This meant I didn't have to go to school! I could feel this huge weight being lifted off my shoulders. I smiled for the first time in a long time. That lasted all of three weeks.

For those three weeks, I spent the weekdays with my aunt, who graciously took good care of me. My sister, Sarah would drop me off down to my aunt's house, who lived next door, then went off to school. I would spend most of the day playing with my aunt's first born and keeping her entertained. I would leave for home at about 9 o'clock. I was meant to go straight home after my sisters arrived back from school, but I enjoyed being there so much that I wouldn't usually leave until it was bed time. I felt safe there. There was no fighting, no slamming of doors, screaming or searching for the empty Vodka bottle. Just the happy gurgling sounds of a baby and the television on in the background.

I remember a brief conversation I had with my aunt one day when we were in the sitting room watching TV.

"What are you going to tell everybody when you get back to school?" She asked me. She was right. I couldn't tell everybody that my mother was gone to rehab. I didn't want anybody to know that my mum was an alcoholic! It was something not to be proud of. It's only now that I'm seventeen years of age that I realize how childish my response was.

"I'll tell them I was in a helicopter accident!" This made her laugh, but I could see why she would!

I was sent back to school a week before my mother's 'release.' I cried... a lot! The only memory I have of that day was walking around the school, by myself, when one of the boys from the class below me asked where I had been for so long? And no, I didn't tell him I was in a helicopter accident! I just replied, "I was sick."

Round Three

This time, back-up was requested, reinforcements were called in, all units stand down, Nan was back in town. My grandmother was something of a godlike

figure whenever she came to visit. It was like something out of a funny movie when we were told of her visit.

"Kids! Your Nan is coming to visit!" Our eyes would go wide, and we'd all share the same look of panic between the four of us. Jumping up from whatever chairs we were sitting on, we'd rush upstairs to our rooms and clean until we physically couldn't clean anymore. When she came to visit, she would always do a 'tidy up' of the house. Huh, I think tidying up was an understatement! The house was cleaned from top to bottom. Every crevice of the house was searched and cleaned!

When it was my mother's third attempt at the first rehab center, Nan was called over from England to help out around the house. She was *literally* just a phone call away.

I don't really remember how I felt about my mother departing for the third time. I think at this stage; I was getting a bit sick of it. It was almost like a routine. But I know this for certain... I still didn't want to go to school!

Again, I was allowed to stay at home while my mother was away. I spent my days with my grandmother, watching Disney movies and drinking Ice Tea.

So, as you can see, my school attendance wasn't the best. Two weeks went by, and I was forced to go back to school. My sister Louise tried to bargain with me. She told me that she would go down to the school and spend the whole day with me, which I agreed to.

The next day, she walked me to school. Louise had a word with my teacher, explaining the situation at home, and she allowed her to stay with me for the day. At around 11 o'clock, she turned to me and said, "I'm just going to the bathroom." I started to get anxious. *I don't want you to leave me!* I thought to myself. *What if you don't come back?!?* She didn't come back. I began to cry once I realized she wasn't coming back. She left for home, and all day I wouldn't stop crying. I felt sick; my eyes were sore from all the crying, and all I wanted to do was go home.

I tried every excuse in the book. "I feel sick," "I have a sore throat," "I have a headache," "My tummy hurts." I would even try to make myself sick by sticking my finger back my throat which only made me gag. But, my grandmother saw right past this and sent me to school. But that didn't stop me! I would often complain of feeling sick at school, which resulted in my teacher calling home, and someone having to come pick me up. I never wanted to leave home. I hated going to school.

After my mother's third attempt, we all thought she might keep it up this time. 'Cause, ya know? Third time lucky, right?

Tears...That's all I can remember from my childhood. Sore throats, bloodshot eyes and that constant sinking feeling in my stomach. My mother started frequently ending up in the hospital, where they would detox her then send her back home. At the early age of seven, I remember my father letting me have a day off school to see my mother, who landed herself up in the hospital. I remember the slippery road as we made our way up to the hospital, going up steep hills and taking sharp corners. I recall walking down the dull, white and empty hallway then turning left to see my Mother turned towards the wall in the bed. The sight of my mother almost brought me to tears, but I didn't cry. I was getting used to seeing my Mother like this. It was the norm for me.

And then I turned eight, which meant the arrival of my new baby brother. TJ's birth was something significant in the Farragher household. I think we all had that same thought after TJ was born. Maybe this will stop Mum drinking? But unfortunately, it didn't. Guess it was just wishful thinking. As an eight-year-old, I wasn't too impressed with the new addition to the family. I hated the fact that I would no longer be the baby of the household anymore.

On the 21st November 2003, my sisters and I went to Galway University hospital to see our new sibling. I sat at the bottom of the bed, looking through watery eyes as I nibbled away at the box of Maltesers. I was trying to hide my tears, but somebody noticed that I was crying.

"What's up with ya, Siobhan?" The whole room went silent as they waited for my response.

"I wanted to be the baby of the family!" My childish behavior resulted in the family bursting out loud with laughter. I took this seriously and continued to sulk. TJ was brought home a few days later. And we all played happy families...for a little while.

That was it. We couldn't take it anymore. My family and I were all exhausted from chasing after my Mother for so long. Her drinking started to get worse. She began doing it a lot more often. I would often come home from primary school, praying as I stepped in the door that my Mother wouldn't be drinking. My stomach would tense as I walked back to my parent's room to discover that my Mother was lying in bed. The smell of vodka, vomit, and sour milk strong in my nostrils. Some days, when I would come home to discover that she had been drinking, she would be in the kitchen. She would greet me with a smile, pretending to be sober, but I knew all too well that she had been drinking. Her facial expression said it all. The way her lips moved when she spoke, how her eyes were vacant and didn't quite follow you when she was talking to you, her body language and how she always had one eye that drooped a little, so it made her face look lopsided.

I could feel my whole body tense as I felt a little hatred towards her, and what she was putting my family through. My sisters, who I knew wouldn't be arriving home for another hour, would surely be furious when they find her in this state. It became a routine after a while. This is how it often went:

1. I would come home from school to discover Mum had been drinking.
2. Sisters would arrive home, and the fights would start.
3. Mum would go back to bed, and the hunt for the vodka bottle would commence.
4. My Father would come home from work at six O'clock. My sisters would tell him about mums drinking, or he would go back to the room and see for himself.
5. Fighting...
6. Fighting...
7. Silence.
8. My Mother would fall asleep, and that would be the end of it, for one day.

I knew I was young but, I tried to help my Mother as much as I could. Coming home from school and finding my Mother 'drunk as a skunk' I would try to fix her up. I'd ask her to get out of bed and put some clean clothes on. I'd brush her hair and

make her look clean and tidy like she was completely sober. I didn't want the family to start fighting again.

"Try to act normal, okay Mum?" I called to my Mother in the bathroom, throwing up whatever was left in her stomach.

"Quick, before they come home!" The sound of vomiting stops, and there's silence.

"It's no use Siobhan; they'll know." She gave up, climbed back into bed and passed out until my sisters would arrive home. I knew she was a lost cause so that I would leave the room go out to the kitchen and sit in silence. I could feel the burning sensation in my eyes as they squeezed out every last drop of water I had left in my body, my stomach tensing uncontrollably, feel my body shake all over, my heart racing and that annoying ticking of the clock counting down each second before it all started again.

The drinking got worse after that. Once, she even got in the car and sped off down the driveway. In my attempt to stop her, I raced off down the driveway after her, screaming her name, calling her back with tears streaming down my face, hoping that she would see the pain she was putting us through. Falling to my knees and looking down at the grass through watery eyes, I just cried, soon to be led back into the house by my sister Elaine.

It was then when she was sent away... to the last rehab center.

The last Rehab Center

"What do you think of your Mother's drinking?" "She is quite fat isn't she?" "Do you think your Mother will get better?" Silence. Every Wednesday we had to endure this. This center took a different approach to my Mother's addiction. Every Wednesday we had to go and have a 'family meeting.' This involved me and my sisters in the same room as my mother and, well...bullying her. She wasn't allowed to utter a word. The counselor would go around to each one of us and ask us the same question. "Do you think your Mother will get better?" Some of us were optimistic and said, "Yes!" But, for two straight weeks, I said "No." On the third week, I seen how hurt my Mother, I saw her cringe every time, and I saw how it was destroying her, so on the third week, I changed my answer.

"Do you think your mother will get better?" The counselor asked me.

"Yes." But I knew she wouldn't. Deep down, I just knew.

"Now, I want everybody to call out your name as I point to you!" the woman who was holding the seminar shouted over the room full of people. We were all gathered together to a meeting, clients, and family members. *Oh no! I have to shout my name to a group of people I don't even know!* Anxiety kicks in. I try to reason with myself. *All you have to do is say 'Siobhan.' How hard can that be!?* Believe me; it was difficult. I begin to panic as the woman goes around. My breathing becomes shallow; my heart begins racing, and I feel like all eyes are on me even though I'm sitting in the very last row at the back of the room.

"Siobhan," I call out, and she moves on to the next person. I let out a sigh of relief. *Thank God that's over!* I don't really remember what the meeting was about, but I remember being shown a video. The video was about a family whose parent was suffering from alcoholism. It shows us how each family member had a role to play.

There was:

- The Hero: This child is the one who “can do no wrong”. This child is viewed as being the best and the brightest; even if they’re not.

- The Scapegoat: Is the child who can “do no right”. This child is viewed as being the reason for everything undesirable and wrong, even when they excel.

- The Lost Child: Is the child who withdraws in self-preservation. Ignored and invisible, this child experiences loneliness and a feeling of not belonging.

- The Clown: Is the child who jokes and distracts the family from the heaviness of its dysfunction. This child expresses the family’s painful experiences as humor.

Can you guess which one I was? I was The Lost Child. Myself and my three other sisters were labelled and strangely enough, these labels all fit our personalities in some way or another.

The video was based around a family whose father was a suffering alcoholic. The wife was upset, the children were upset, the relatives were angry, the neighbours were pissed off...it was basically a movie about a bunch of people being upset. I found it pointless, to be honest, and at the age of ten found it incredibly disinteresting. I didn’t have to watch a movie about a family who had been affected by alcoholism. I was living it.

When my Mother came out of the last rehab centre, I thought everything would change for the better. I knew deep down that the treatment wasn’t going to work, but we all tried to stay optimistic. I was allowed to go with my Father to collect her. It was silent all the way up. I stared out the window most of the trip, dreaming of life were I had a sober Mother, where I had a healthy functional family, where attending meetings or alcoholism didn’t exist. A perfect world that, unfortunately, I could not have. But, I can always dream.

“Are you happy about Mum coming home?” My Father asks about twenty minutes into the journey. I look at him and nod. “Yup.”

“Do you think she will get better?” He asks, keeping his eyes on the road but watching me in the corner of his eye to see my facial response. I was really getting sick of that question now! I didn’t say yes, and I didn’t say no. I just simply replied, “I hope so.” Because that’s all I could do.... Hope.

We went to collect her and next thing I remember we’re back in the jeep. I stare out the window at the rehab centre, thinking of all the other clients in there. I wonder what they were thinking. Did they miss their family? Do they wish they could leave like my mother did today? I couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. As we drove away, I remember thinking to myself; *Thank God I’ll never have to go back to that place...I hope.*

Now, you know how I said her drinking got bad before? Huh, this time, got much more interesting. Despite the fact that she was sober for seven months her behaviour was worse than ever. She was terrified and angry. She had all this anger built up and was terrified of drinking again, so she took it out on the drink and the family.

I was still in Primary School, and I was attending a bit more but don’t get me wrong, I still hated going. My Mum’s behaviour started to get erratic. Compulsive, buying of polytunnels that were never used, starting diets because she was told if

she ever had sugar, wheat or flour she would start drinking again, and the praying! This confused me because my Mother doesn't really come across as the religious type. She religiously stuck to a schedule that she had on her phone, and every ten minutes a new alarm would pop up telling her to do something.

After seven months the drinking started again. There are two events that really stick out in my mind after her "release" from the last rehab centre.

I open the sliding door and hear nothing but silence. I walk through the kitchen cautiously, listening carefully to the snores of my Mother from the downstairs bedroom.

"Mum?" I call out, but I hear nothing. "Mum!" I shout louder, silence once again. I can only assume that she's out of the house (to buy a drink?) doing something. So I continue up the stairs to my bedroom and throw my bag in. But something catches my attention. Looking to my right, I see my Mother collapsed on the floor, passed out. I panic. And as an eleven-year-old, I'm thinking of the worst case scenario, "SHE'S DEAD!" After my fit of panic, I kneel down close to her and listen. I'm greeted by the smell of vodka and heavy breathing. My body relaxes, I try to wake her up, but she doesn't stir. My sisters come home from school, and it all starts again.

I walk into the kitchen and hear the sounds of a grown woman sobbing. I had just come home from school to discover my mother had been drinking. And at this stage, *I* had had enough! I always stepped back and kept out of the way when it came to my mother's drinking before. But I was twelve now, and I was getting angry. Angry at what she was putting our family through and angry that she still continued to drink even though she KNEW what she was putting us through. I thought she was just purely selfish.

The numb feeling that once took hold of my body has now been replaced with a furious shake of anger. Shouting at her through tears, I ran off to the sitting room in a huff, and angrily switched on the TV, trying to concentrate on the TV and not my mother's selfish act of drinking. I went to collect something in the kitchen, and when I opened the door and seen the sorry sight before me, I grabbed T.J and pulled him into the sitting room so no harm would come to him.

She had smashed the bottle of Vodka. Shattered glass and Vodka was spread across the kitchen floor.

"I'm sick of it, Siobhan! Sick of drink!" She cried, her eyes red and bloodshot. My stomach tenses at seeing my mother like this. So weak and vulnerable. Isn't she meant to be someone I idolize? Somebody who I want to be proud? I didn't respond. I couldn't. I was too scared, and my first instinct was to take care of T.J. It all started again; family members would come home, and the fighting would commence.

The Teen Years

When I started secondary school, I started having all sorts of panic and anxiety attacks. My mind had turned against me, and I began to get more self-conscious about the way I looked and just about everything I did. I found everything was a challenge, from walking down the corridors to hopping on the bus. I discovered that my self-confidence had gone way down and that talking to people was a daunting task. I began getting frequent anxiety attacks that could last for days

or even weeks, which would result in me missing a few school days because I felt I wasn't mentally able to do it.

I sometimes felt like I couldn't cope with the world, and thought about taking my own life, once. I never went through with it, apparently. It was then my mother sent me for counselling, where I discovered that I suffered from anxiety, and if not taken care of could lead to full blown depression. Well, I can tell ya this for certain, I got the help I needed and had never felt better! I don't look at counselling as something to be ashamed of. At first, I was, but now I think it's something people need to start opening up to. Nowadays, I can't really come across anybody who hasn't been for counselling. Anyway, back to the story...

My mother's drinking was still at the same consistent level as to when I was a kid, but the last two years she had got particularly aggressive.

At the age of fourteen, I was doing well in school and had a very close-knit group of friends. My best friend, Jayde, who always helped me get through my mother's drinking, had always tried her best to comfort me. How we met is actually an unusual story. It went on for a while. Anytime I went into the locker room to get my books; she would run in, flick my hair then run off giggling like a mad eejit. I hadn't a clue who it was at. First, I only ever caught the tail end of her before she turned the corner and disappeared out of sight. I later found out she did this because I had a kink in my hair, and she found it very amusing to play with it. We began talking, and that was it!

I can't remember the last time my Mum went on a session. And funny enough neither can she. Or anybody! I think it's best that way. The less you know the best! Right? Well, this next event was a particular heartbreaking one, and it went something like this...

I'm upstairs in my bedroom listening to my Dad speaking to a drunken Valerie Farragher, who is halfway across the country...somewhere. I honestly don't remember where she was that night. All I remember is that she was staying in a hotel for the night and she ran up quite a bill with that phone call!

It's late at night, and the only source of light I have is the light from the hallway coming through the crack of the door. I had my hand in between the door and the door frame, so I can hear the conversation going on downstairs. I'm sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, my right arm on my knees that I have close to my chest and my left hand keeping the door open. I hear those horrible words no child should ever hear come out of their father's mouth. "When you get back to Mayo, we are getting a fucking divorce!" I sit upright and let go of the door and bury my face into both hands. The tears start flowing, and I'm engulfed in total darkness. The whole world is blocked off, and all I can hear is a high pitched ringing noise in my ear. *No! This can't be happening!*

A few minutes later, I hear my Dad's heavy feet trudge up the stairs. He hears me whimpering and comes into my room, only to hit my legs as he opens the door. I stand up to let him past; he gives me a hug, and I cry into his chest. He leads me to my bed, which I reluctantly clamber into, sits beside me, wipes away a tear and softly tells me, "Everything's gonna be okay." He gives me a smile, and leaves the room, where I'm left staring up at the ceiling thinking of life with divorced parents.

How could this be happening? What did I do to deserve this? I begin to sob again, and Sarah comes in to check what the noise is.

“What’s up with ya?!” she half screeches.

“I don’t want Mum and Dad to get a divorce!” I tell her. She rolls her eyes, and tells me, “Mum and Dad are not getting a divorce! Dad was just angry! He always says that!” Well, that’s comforting to know...I guess. Well, they’re still together now so, I guess she was right after all.

After

And now, that brings us to here. Eighteen years of age, as of next month, and writing a chapter in this book. Mum got sober when I was about fourteen, and life couldn’t be better! I found that I developed a shake in my hands from my anxiety and panic attacks, and I discovered that I had something called ‘Essential Tremor’. I later looked it up online, and saw that one way to calm the shaking was...You’ll never believe this, it was alcohol!

“Ya lucky bitch!” She half laughs, after I tell my mother.

“You’re just jealous, ‘cause yeah, I have a medical condition!” I say, sarcastically, and we burst out laughing. I don’t think the site was legit anyways, so I’m not really taking the ‘alcohol cure’ to heart! Anyway, life’s a lot better now. We’re now closer than ever.

I hate the fact that I never really had a, what you would call, normal childhood. My childhood was one full of pain, anxiety, tears, rehab centres and counsellors. Then I look at my little brother. Yes, he did have to go through some of Mum’s drinking, but I know in a few years time he will have forgotten all about it. I see the relationship they have now and think; *God, why couldn’t I have that?* What was once “Siobhan, grab me the sick bowl. Quick!” has now been replaced by “T.J, would ya come here and give your mother a kiss before ya go?!?” Oh, how times have changed.

But now to move onto the next chapter in my life. Flying the nest and going out into the big bad world, of bosses, bills and paying taxes! My Dad’s determined for me to stay but, I’m determined to go. Experience new things, go on wild adventures, meet new people and see new things...Huh, let’s see how long I can survive!

So, if you have a parent or relative suffering from alcohol misuse, and you feel as though they will never stop, I’ll give you one piece of advice. Stay optimistic. You never know what life has in store for you or the one suffering from alcoholism. I hope this book has given you some faith. And remember, just when you feel like things are falling apart, they might just be falling into place.

Louise Farragher

Louise's Story

I have honestly no idea where to start...

When I was asked to write my part in this book all these memories came back to me. Mum spoke to me on the phone about it; my voice wobbled, and eyes welled up. Strange, I'm always talking about it but have never written it down. Even today, I still think of my childhood and wonder, has it made me who I am today? Maybe at the end of this, I'll know...

I've read books on how to get through being the child of an alcoholic but never felt like it reached out to me. I always found them a bit dated and usually focus on the partner and not so much the family as a whole. I'm your average 24-year-old, I'm currently living in Australia, and trying to save up a bit of money so I can put myself through college. I'm a nursing assistant but aspire to be a nurse. My grandmother was a nurse, (my Dad's Mum) but I wasn't fortunate enough to meet her. I knew I wanted to be a nurse when I found documents belonging to her. They were so interesting to read. I ran to tell my parents I wanted to be a nurse. My Dad smiled and said, "You'd be good at that."

The chances are that if you're reading this book now, you may have been through something similar. I really wish that the words in this will be able to give you (whether you're young, old or in-between) courage and hope you may be looking for. It took me a long time to find it, but good things come to those who wait. So I'll get on with it, this is my story...

Growing up I was a Daddy's girl; I followed him around day and night. I would have to run to keep up with him back the fields as he was so tall. 'Daddy long legs' I would call him. My Mum was so good, always busy cleaning and cooking; she even bleached our white school socks!

I remember Dad working away quite a bit; his job would sometimes require him to stay there overnight. My sisters and I loved that house, the swings at the top of the garden that Dad built from old telephone poles, dancing around the willow tree that Mum planted in the middle of the garden, that she would give out about as it 'won't grow!'

Our small bedroom, green in colour, and very little floor space. We made the most of what we had, and it worked very well for us. I never remember alcohol in that house. We had the blessing of our home and Siobhan's christening party, in 1995 were the only times I ever saw alcohol in the house. I was never afraid of alcohol; it seemed to make people happy, make people more generous, relations were always giving us a pound or two that we could spend on sweets.

In 1998 my parents decided we should build a new house, we were very packed into the one we had so it made sense to do it. I recall a bottle of Gin my parents had received as a Christmas present left idle and dusty in a cupboard for years. It was about this time when a friend of my Mum's called round and they opened it. We refer to this as 'the first drink'.

Our parents started building the house in 1999, while our new house was under construction we stayed off site in a mobile home. For the summer months, my sisters and I went to England.

Our house was finished just in time for the New Year, and my parents were having a millennium party. The house was buzzing, and the champagne, beer, and wine are flowing. I was driven crazy by the notion that the world was going to end on this day, so while the countdown was happening, I was around the corner covering my ears and my eyes shut tight. I had literally made myself sick with worry so my Mum put me into her bed so I could watch the TV. She sat beside me and sang Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl' to me. She was always such a caring person, and that has never left her. This is where it all started; it was after that that we were starting to notice more alcohol in the house.

The year was now 2001 and Mum's drinking was getting out of control. Dad and Mum told us about rehab. I knew she was drinking a lot but did she really have to go? At 12 years old I thought it best to keep my mouth shut but at that time thought it was the right decision.

The first rehab.

Dad did his best during this time, he tried to make everything as normal as possible, and he did a good job as Mum had been somewhat absent since the drinking started, she was there, but there was a void. She wasn't herself. So it seemed pretty the same around the house. Dad came in and explained why Mammy was going to be away for three months. Siobhan was only 5 and didn't understand yet, but she missed mammy.

The day we went to visit Mum was a weird one. It was a chilly day, and it had just rained. It was colder inside. It felt very religious. I was brought up as a Catholic, but this place gave me the chills. The halls were extensive and bland, a single payphone, left idle on the wall, the smell of cigarettes and incense filled my nose. Mum appeared, it was like she hadn't seen us in years and smothered us in kisses and hugs. A feeling so familiar that had long been forgotten. A tour was insisted. We were brought down the corridors while Mum pointed out the different rooms and explained what was in them. The smoking room was close to the entrance; I don't know why it stood out to me. When we passed it, I could see about 15 people all crammed into a small glass room.

We were shown to her room which looked like a hotel room. Two single beds, no TV and a basic shower room. We were then brought into the canteen where a thin man with a very sunken face smiled at us with yellow teeth. He was definitely one of the 15 smokers. He handed us biscuits with smarties on. We were told to play outside but not to wander too far. We walked around outside, people, who we assumed were workers, were actually residents of the centre waved at us, and we exchanged smiles.

The car journey home was quite. I couldn't understand why she had to be in there for so long.

After Mum came home from the first rehab things returned to normal, all but the drinking was involved, it was pleasant, and it was like the good old days. I often wondered if we didn't move house would things have been the same or would the alcohol creep in to spoil things there too.

This feeling of pleasantness was short lived as the alcohol demon was back. Dad would send us around the house looking for the remains of her session, and we

checked all the usual places. Mum is short in stature, so they were never in high places.

The corner cupboard that had a glass window but a bottle would be tucked into the far right corner, a bottle in the hot press among the linen that was half arsed folded but clean. And the odd bottle in our rooms. Once, I found a blue bottle of vodka in my sock drawer. I took it to my sister. We disposed of all the drink around the side of the house.

The screaming fights we used to have when she would find out what we did. By the time I was 15 years old, her drinking was getting worse. She was always disappearing, and we would worry constantly. She fell pregnant with my brother in the year 2003. We thought that this might be it regarding the end of her drinking, but sadly we were mistaken. The fact that she was pregnant did change her drinking habits to less but didn't stop completely. I pleaded with her to stop that she was going to harm or even kill the harmless baby that hid inside. She slumped into an armchair banging her head of the timber frame. She just laughed. What was she laughing about? She was selfish, only thinking of herself and not the baby. How could someone be giving the privilege of bringing life into the world and go about it the way she was.

I asked my Dad to teach me how to drive that year. I thought if anything were ever to happen at least I could drive her to the hospital. Or take my sisters away.

T.J was born November 2003. Dad was already at the hospital, we drove up with another relative and went to Galway. Raining, not surprising for Ireland. Siobhan, no longer a baby, sat quite. I stared at my brother thanking God he was healthy and normal. The room filled with coos and weird kissing sounds filled our ears.

The day he came home the sun shined. There were no clouds in the sky, and the birds sang aloud. We all fought to hold him but sent T.J back to get nappy changes. Lol.

I was now in my Junior Certificate year and struggled with my subjects. I did my best, but there were so many distractions. I'm not using it as an excuse, but it wasn't easy being at school worrying about what's going on at home. As her drinking habits continued we would be concerned about her being at home with T.J. God, what if something happened!

We would sit on the 45-minute bus ride home anxious about what was going to greet us thinking of home, not homework. One evening after school, fear froze in our bodies. An Ambulance sat outside our house. A cold chill ran through my body, and I swallowed hard. We waited impatiently for the bus to pass so we could cross the busy road, when safe we ran as fast as we could. Mum had passed out. T.J was in the care of a relative. An all too familiar sight was the Ambulance. Back into the hospital she was given a detox and went to AA meetings. It wasn't like she wasn't trying but nothing was working. It was so frustrating!

Baby T.J screamed the house down; the dog had bitten his dummy, and we couldn't get him to settle. That fecking dog was always eating our things! Dad drove all around the local town looking for another, but none worked. T.J never had a dummy after that. If Mum were here, she would have known how to soothe him. He eventually calmed down. I placed him into his cot; we tiptoed out with the fear he'd

wake, and we'd have to go through it again. Dad with his hands on his face said "Your Mother should be here. This isn't fair". It was the first time I'd seen Dad feel sorry for us all.

Turning 17, I successfully passed my theory test so I could drive. I felt this would take the pressure off Dad a little. Mum was going to be gone for ten days so we proceeded with life as best we would. Trying to cook and clean. Go to school while T.J was taken care of by family.

In the evenings, sitting on the sitting room floor, I would put T.J to sleep. My legs would go numb from sitting for so long. 'Elmo in Grouch Land' was the film he was into at the time, that little red puppet drove me crazy but it worked, and I wasn't going to question it. Sweet boy, his only care was his bottle.

I loved driving. I got a real independence from it. The family car, I treated as my own. I didn't have it the day Mum did a disappearing act. But this time it went on for longer, she was usually home by dark. Now it worried, I and Dad went on the search for her. I walked around the town looking for signs of our car and kept my eyes peeled.

Hours later we found her checked into a B&B, I spoke to the manager and explained our situation. My face pale, I opened the door of her room to find her with a bottle of Vodka. What was she planning? The thought crossed my mind that she was trying to kill herself, but I didn't feel she was that kind of person. Dad helped her to the back seat of the car. I drove home, fixing my eyes on Dad's break lights as I followed. She moaned and shouted. Telling me, I should have left her there. Then apologizing. Then telling me I was a bitch for bringing her home. A drink made her change, say things that were so hurtful and made me cry. She cried as if I was taking her to death row. I never took my eyes off Dad's car.

An opportunity came up to go to an Irish boarding school for a transition year. A friend would go with me, how exciting we thought. No parents or rules. We thought it was the best idea. So we did it.

God, I hated it there! I knew I pushed to go; my Dad didn't think it was such a good idea, and Dad was right. I did everything I could to go home; I didn't belong and never settled in. Dad said I could come home, but Mum said no, she thought it would do me the world of good. I felt sorry for leaving and felt I had made a mistake.

While I was away, Mum went into another rehab, a different one this time. We refer to this place as 'The last rehab', and here she was told that the reason she drank was that she was a food addict.

They had a family day every Wednesday and with me being away I wasn't always able to attend, but this was something we'd not experienced as a family. Group therapy. The idea of me seeing a therapist was alien. Were we in need of this? We were fine. It was Mum that had the problem not us. But that's what the programme said we had to do so we did it. Overwhelmed by the amount of people that were there, I took a seat in the middle beside my sisters and Dad. A man or woman would read from a projector. I was negative from the start thinking; I could be a therapist if that meant learning from projectors and putting on tapes.

They then explained about alcohol and, what happens in the body, the chemical reactions, and the effects. We took a walk around after the few hours of biology lessons. This place was a lot brighter; I compared it to the other one.

Flowers and photos line the walls, a huge dining room and lecture hall was there. This place was fancy. The smoking room was a big glass room, Mum being a smoker was in there. She introduced us to other residents. I told them I was currently in boarding school and released for the day. They laughed and agreed; they weren't allowed to leave the premises.

We were given one-on-one meetings with an assigned counsellor. I don't remember too much of this man. I don't remember what he looks like, or even his name. We sat down in a small room. A single box of tissues left on a small oak table.

Mum joined in on the session. He asked questions about Mum; we looked at her as if to say; this is gossiping with the subject in the room.

"So, your Mum is fat, isn't she?" he said as he looked at his notebook, he looked up for a response. Nobody answered. Did he seriously just ask that? I looked at Elaine; she looked at me, we both looked at Mum. I don't know if we answered. After that, we hardly answered his questions. I didn't touch that tissue box; I refused to cry for him. We were told to make ourselves busy. They put Mum on a food plan and yes she lost weight on it but only by cutting out sugar, wheat, and flour. They basically told her that if she was to have any of these, it could result in relapse. I didn't know that these food types would make you an alcoholic?

In March mum came out of the rehab.

I had stayed in the boarding school for part of the summer but was working. I felt incredibly alone; I did learn to fend for myself, paying bills, cooking my own meals and learning how to balance working life with social life but I didn't belong here. The kids from the area didn't like me for some reason. One boy would make up rumours about me that were stupid and untrue. I couldn't handle it. I went home; I've not been back since, and I don't think I ever will.

Mum made us go to Alateen meetings, a meeting for the children of the alcoholic where we met kids our own age. It was a small meeting with two facilitators. The room we had the meetings in was horrible! Dark, it looked like a room that had been long forgotten. A fireplace with old black ash placed in the corner created a cold draft. No one ever wanted to be seated beside it. The room would be prepared before with single posters of the 12 step slogans. I only ever liked one. 'This too shall pass' We had to take it in turns to say one, and the Serenity prayer. We were given a blue book of stories to keep, a different child from somewhere in the world would have written the page long story. Then we would talk about it. The two facilitators sat quietly only speaking to break the tension and keep the ball rolling.

That September I returned to my regular school, I settled in straight away. I was back with my old friends; the school hadn't changed, but my life was about to.

Mum's behaviour started to change a little after the rehab. The whole house was cleared of anything that contained sugar, wheat or flour. So practically everything! Sweets were banned from the house, so we used to get our sugar fixes at school. I'd never seen her act this way, and it was odd. As long as she's not drinking it was an improvement, I guess. Mum stayed this way for about seven months. She lived in fear, in case she touched sugar, wheat or flour she was going to relapse, that's what she thought, that's what they told her.

I guess she came to a breaking point. Honestly, it didn't seem like much of a surprise. She had practically driven herself to drink. So what now? What on earth could we do this time but stick it out like the countless other times before? We were tired, worn out; mentally and physically exhausted from our previous efforts. We just couldn't cry anymore. I could see the family throw their hands in the air and walk away.

I couldn't though, something told me it wasn't over yet. I always felt sorry for her, even the days that she'd really piss me off. I always felt bad for outbursts and dramas. But I was so broken down at this stage. I think what broke me the most was what she was doing to T.J and Siobhan. At least I got to know her as who she used to be - a time she told us she loved us every day, read to us at night, danced and laughed. She didn't laugh anymore.

I recall a winter night when I was about 8 or 9, back in our old house. We were in the kitchen dancing. Just me and her, she was swinging me around so fast my hair flew in the air. We were dancing to 'Brown Eyed Girl' by Van Morrison. Oh, we danced! We would knock our hips together and poorly mouth the words. We laughed, she wasn't the most graceful of dancers. She made us all laugh all the time until we cried.

But now we cry for a different reason. I used to be angry, but now I feel sorrow.

I would look at her, unconscious in the bed, the light she used to have was gone. Breathing heavy in the bed I would shake her to see if she was responsive. I would get a grunt. That was enough to satisfy me for now. The smell of vodka overwhelmed me in the room. Vomit from earlier. Who was this woman? And what had she done to the woman I used to dance in the kitchen with?

I was now in my Leaving Certificate year at school. I'd missed so much school. If lying to teachers was an exam I would have gotten an 'A'. And apologies if you happen to read this now, but I thought the most important place to be at the time was at home.

I had one mock exam over at this stage; I had math tomorrow. Feck, I hated math. I was terrible at it! Trying to cram at the kitchen counter it just looked like a mess of equations that had formulas. I needed a formula for my own life, but it wasn't in this book. 'Mum's drunk' was a phrase that was often used in the house. I walked toward her room to make sure she was ok. The smell of drink would punch me in the face. I can still smell it now! I asked the usual questions and got hardly anything; I checked her eyes. Rolling. I got a bad feeling from this. She was really out of it. I sat back down at the counter that had a radiator under it. Dad was now home. Upset with Mum's drinking, he decided he couldn't go near her. I told him to sit down and made the cup of tea. What is it with us Irish? Tea is almost the answer to everything. After Dad had cooked the dinner, he handed T.J a banana to give to Mum. I watched his brown head of hair bob from the other side of the counter. He made me smile, even when he didn't do anything. I waited for him to come back before I relaxed.

I went in a few minutes later to see if she had taken it. She was on the bed. Rolling around. Crying, screaming. What happened! I examined the room for evidence. The hook from the bedroom door lay on the floor. Had she just tried to kill

herself!? With the phone beside her, she told me she'd rang West Doc. They rang back. Sick to my stomach I told Dad to stay out of the room and wait somewhere else. The doctor was on his way, and five minutes later he arrived. She cried and said things like "I just want to die, but I can't do it to my mother." She was trying to apologize for everything that happened. She thought we could lead normal lives if she were dead. I didn't say anything. I listened.

The doctor sat on the windowsill of the room. He was asking her questions about what she had just done. He wrote up a letter to send her to the hospital. She behaved so well for him; I was thinking to myself: *Yeah, act nice for him.*

I told Dad I was going to bring her to A&E. I insisted on it and wouldn't take no for an answer. T.J and Siobhan needed him at home. Me and one of my sisters helped her into the car and headed to the hospital stopping twice for her to dry wretch. Dad often rang to make sure we were okay. I dropped them at the entrance and parked the car. Raining, late and cold I put my head on the steering wheel and took a few breaths. Getting out of the car I walked towards the emergency sign and the door slid open.

The Department was dazzling, and it took a few moments for my eyes to adjust. I walked toward a lady behind a glass window, said hello and smiled. I handed her the letter; she looked at Mum, then me then the letter again. "Ok Miss Farragher, please take a seat."

She should have said: "You're going to be here a long time girl."

We went to the triage nurse. She needed to be sober to be seen. They took her blood and just sent us back out. I would like to think I'm quite patient with people but sometimes in hospitals it's hard. No matter if you're a regular 18-year-old like the Pope or me, the waiting is a hard game to play. Hours later I asked what our situation was in the line.

"We're busy" I'm told. There was no point getting mad. Would it get me there any faster?

Mum slept on; people were staring at her. I tried to keep her awake, but I gave up around 3 am. My eyes burned in my head, yet they kept watering. I yawned and paced the floor, clutching a coffee from the over-priced coffee machine. I looked at the time 5 am. Something sparked in me. Things were going through my head about my past, everything that led us to this day. I was avoiding the problem and never faced it straight on. What the hell was going on, this was unfair? I was mad. I exploded, and the poor receptionist got the brunt of it. Mum woke with my tone of voice, angry but trying to be polite I told the woman: "I want to speak to someone in the Psychiatric Department now, please." I then began to well up and cry. "I completely get your busy; I get it. I want to be a nurse some day and appreciate the fact that you have a million things on your plate. But I need to see someone. I need to go home to the rest of my family. I need to do my math exam tomorrow; I need to sleep. Can someone please see my Mum? Please?" I quieted down.

"I wanna go home now please, please?"

She stared at me blankly. "Someone will be right with you Miss." I thanked her and took my seat wiping my face. People looked at me, one woman smiled.

Half an hour later a man shook my hand. He told me he heard about me and called me the girl that caused a fuss. I couldn't care less about what he called me. I

was just happy to see someone talk to us that wasn't a receptionist. I apologized for my behaviour. He told me I could go now, but I insisted on staying until she was in a room, or a bed a stretcher, I didn't care. They weren't going to do anything tonight, so when I was satisfied, I kissed Mum on the cheek and went home. Now 7 am I didn't feel the drive home; I was a zombie. I spoke to Dad and went to school. I failed my exam.

Later that week I visited Mum. She had been there for three days. I stood at the door; she hadn't seen me yet. She looked good as far as I could tell. She looked hydrated and younger.

I smiled and walked over happy with the way she looked. I sat down, and we chatted.

"So Mum, ya nuts or what?"

"We're all nuts Louise; you just have a milder form" she laughed.

She always kept her sense of humour; there was no tension and the conversation flowed. Did I have my Mum back?

Dad brought her home that Sunday. She pulled her shit together, at last! She was recommended to a group called AWARE and attended their meetings at least twice a week. She kept up with AA too. There she could talk about the fact that she was suffering from depression. Yes, she was diagnosed with postnatal depression from when Siobhan was born. We finally got our answer. You see, in Ireland, we have an unusual system. You are either depressed or an alcoholic, not at the same time. Therefore, you will only be treated as one or the other. In practically every other country in the world they have dual diagnosis services but not here.

I was mad at first, but I have decided what's the point of being bitter about it? Being mad, shouting, screaming and causing a fuss may help you get a doctor down to see you a bit faster in my case but it's not a problem solver. Mum isn't mad about it anymore either. It does take a while to get over the shock of how bad the system can sometimes be, so what do we do now? Well, my Mum wouldn't stand for that, 'do something about it!' She would say. And do it now.

She asked me to take part in her team to start a treatment service. I agreed and left my job in Galway, took a job in my hometown so I could be closer to home. The things I have seen, experienced and learnt have really opened my eyes. I took part in courses from the Learning Curve where I studied drugs and alcohol, studied child and adult psychology and care in nursing. I've met some of the AWARE team, they gave Mum a new lease of life, allowing her to become a facilitator with training. It has opened my eyes to a whole world of possibilities, and the drive to never give up. The support I got from so many people was amazing, all my friends, family. My beautiful sisters and brother. My Dad, tough as nails but soft at heart.

I'm not damaged or traumatised from my past. I used to wonder, why me? Now I think, well why not me? I know I am a stronger person from this. She couldn't help herself for so many years now she's got the experience and the drive to want to go on. Help other people and I want in on the ride. I am so proud of my Mother for where she is today. I think the night of her suicide attempt was her rock bottom, and I thank God that it was a fail because it was a win for us and now for anyone who feels the same and can relate to this. There is hope. Pain is only temporary. This too shall pass.

So here I am today, I am your regular 24 years old, yeah, I have a bit of a past, but you wouldn't know it unless you asked.

Life can be a bad math problem; it looks complicated, often confusing. Sometimes you just want to give up on math, say, feck it, I'll copy off someone else or look in the back for the answers. But if you focus, find a correct formula and ask for help it will become apparent. It may take years, months but you'll find it.

I'd bet a drink on it.

Louise Farragher

(Recovered Child of an Alcoholic)

A Commentary on Service Provision

Valerie Farragher

How can services be improved?

This chapter details some specific actions the Government can take which can go a long way towards resolving the dual diagnosis problem. Some of these measures will cost very little, others will cost a lot more, but will reduce the costs of treating addiction so overall they will save money as well as improving peoples' lives.

Actions which do not cost much

Make the issue of dual diagnosis a top priority for the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children to consider.

Under its own terms of reference, it is possible for the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children to consider the issue of dual diagnosis and investigate whether the policy in this area should be changed both from the viewpoint of people using addiction and mental health services and value for money perspective. After all, a lot of money is being wasted because people are being treated the wrong way and end up going back into rehab again and again or end up being treated for liver damage, or in accident and emergency units. I went through four rehabs all of which received some type of funding from the Government; The Oireachtas Committee should also review progress on implementing the recommendations of the HSE Working Group on Residential Treatment & Rehabilitation (Substance Users).¹

Make not-for-profit service providers adopt the Governance Code for Community, Voluntary and Charitable Organisations in Ireland.

One of the reasons why the dual diagnosis problem has gone on for so long is because service providers believe they are doing a great job.

Yes, it is true that they have helped many people who would otherwise be dead, but there are many, many people who went through their services or were not accepted into their services which are dead, because they did not have an active family like mine, who insisted, I get a psychiatric evaluation and did not give up on me.

Now, corporate governance is the system that ensures the fit between the organisation's purpose and how it actually works. So, good corporate governance means service providers would look and see how well they are actually doing and ask their clients how they are doing. Good corporate governance means service providers would actually be accountable to the people they exist to serve.

There is a code of governance ^{eight} developed for not-for-profit organisations that provide many addiction services. If addiction service providers adopted the governance code, they would then have to listen really to people who go through their services and ensure they take action to improve their services.

A similar code of governance ² exists for State agencies so the Controller and Auditor General should ensure State agencies in addiction are implementing this code.

So the government should tell all addiction service providers that they will no longer fund them unless they adopt the Governance Code. They could say that organisations have to commit to work towards implementing the code by the end of 2014 and then allow organisations two years actually to start operating the code. This gives the organisations plenty of notice so they can start work on implementing

the code, after which time the Government should withdraw funding from organisations who have not implemented the code.

Stop any 'Joe Soap' calling themselves a counsellor or a therapist.

In Ireland, anybody can call themselves a therapist or counsellor and start treating people. In fact now that David Beckham has given up playing football, he could come here and set himself up as an addiction counselling service tomorrow, telling people that playing football will help break their addiction. He would not be breaking any rules or regulations and could not be stopped.

The Government set up CORU ¹⁰ which regulates the training and education of psychologists, social workers, etc. and licences who can call themselves a psychologist or social worker. But there is nothing for therapists or counsellors, and although the Minister for Health, Dr. James O Reilly, has said he will do something about this, not enough is happening.

The Government should say by what date they are going to protect people like you and me from counsellors and therapists who are not properly trained and don't know what they are doing. They should prepare an implementation plan for when therapists and counsellors will be regulated by CORU, so this date is not missed.

Change how health care professionals are educated to make sure they understand how integrated treatment for people with addiction and mental health problems can be provided.

I mentioned previously how GPs are not always well trained in mental health and may not understand the issue of dual diagnosis. But it's not just the GPs; it's also other health care professionals such as social workers. Doctors, nurses, social workers, counsellors, etc. should all be trained to understand people often have mental health and addiction problems together and that they need to receive integrated treatment.

So all of the bodies involved in health care, from the Medical Council, which is the regulatory body for doctors, to An Bord Altranas which is the regulatory body for nurses, to CORU to the ICGP, which is the representative body for GPs, to the Irish College of Psychiatry should be asked to come up with a plan for how they propose to implement proper training for health care professionals in treating dual diagnosis.

Use technology to allow clients and their families provide real-time feedback on services

Talking to people with addictions, they tell me very often the service they actually get is different to the service they were promised. Dual Diagnosis Ireland told me about one service which claims in their annual audited financial accounts to provide psychiatric rehab services, but they do not know of anybody going through the service who has ever had treatment from a psychiatrist.

Questionnaires have been used by the Mental Health Commission to collect information on patients' experiences in mental health inpatient centres. The HSE also have a licence to use the English NHS questionnaires to collect people's experiences in outpatient mental health services. These questionnaires could easily be adapted for use in addiction services.

The technology now exists to capture people's experiences as they happen on a Smartphone app. This really helps to drive improvements in services as the information is being collected in "real time" and is available to managers as soon as people provide the information.

To develop this app would probably cost about €30,000, which is a very small investment when you consider the improvements it could drive in services.

A Smartphone app should be developed by the HSE to allow people give real-time feedback on their experiences in addiction services, and this information should then be provided so people can actually see what is really going on in services.

Use the new client information system for mental health in addiction services.

The HSE has said they are going to bring in a computerised information system to help improve services for people with mental health problems. This system should also be introduced into the addiction services as well because then it will be become easier to see how many people have an addiction and a mental health problem and it will help the health care professionals coordinate treatments.

Make the referral criteria to get into addiction services public.

The website www.drugs.ie is a very useful website for finding addiction services. However, people often waste a lot of time contacting the services without knowing when services will accept people. The conditions are not on the website. Waiting lists are often very long which means people can't access services.

The information on www.drugs.ie should be increased to cover:

1. What criteria they use to accept people for services.
2. What criteria they use to reject people for services.
3. How they deal with dual diagnosis issues.
4. How long the waiting lists are.

Actions which will cost more money but will be offset by savings

Put government regulation of addiction services in place.

HIQA is responsible for monitoring general health care services, with the Mental Health Commission responsible for monitoring mental health services when a psychiatrist is involved.

No Government agency is responsible for monitoring addiction services and making sure they work well. The in-patient services I went to just offered the 12 steps and nothing else. That's why my depression went unnoticed for so long and why they told me it was my fault because I did not follow the 12 steps. As Dr. Mark Willenbring in "Inside Rehab" states:

"Nowhere else in medicine is it okay to blame the patient when treatment doesn't work."

There are many other treatment models available such as integrated treatment models which offer a wide range of supports, to detox in the home, but these are not available in Ireland.

Unlike mental health services, there is no licensing of in-patient addiction centres, and there are none of the inspections, codes of practise or quality framework which mental health services must follow.

In mental health services, the Mental Health Commission's quality framework states that every person in the service must have their own personal

treatment plan which that person is involved in preparing. So there is no 'sheep dip' approach where every person has the same treatment, which ignores the fact that their problems might be different to everyone else's problems.

There are still a lot of problems in mental health services, but the Mental Health Commission is making a huge difference to how mental health services operate because services risk losing their licence to treat people if they do not adhere to the quality framework.

So, addiction services should also be regulated by the Mental Health Commission, who have the skills to inspect services and will just need some extra staff.

Set up a joint working group of representatives from the health care professions with service user input managed by a full-time international expert in dual diagnosis.

A working group with representatives from GPs, psychiatrists, nurses, counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and service users should be set up to develop:

1. Guidelines for screening for dual diagnosis.
2. Guidelines for treating the dual diagnosis, explaining what works and when to use it or avoid it - for example forcing clients to read letters from family members that had abused them when they were children, or when home based detox can be used instead of going to the hospital.
3. Guidelines for measuring outcomes- how well a person is doing when they leave the service. There are lots of international standards for doing this.
4. A rating framework for measuring at what level services can treat dual diagnosis, e.g. America is using the dual diagnosis capability in addiction treatment tool (DDCAT) to see how good services are in treating dual diagnosis.¹¹
5. Develop service user pathways of care which everybody can understand and recognise different treatments are required for different people. At the moment it is tough for ordinary people and their health care providers to know which service would be best for them and how to get into the services. When cancer services were being developed a one-page leaflet,¹² was developed for GPs to explain how people should be treated. A similar guideline should be developed for addiction and mental health services which also deals with dual diagnosis.
6. Develop separate treatment models for young people and children because their needs are different.

To make sure this working group does not become just another talking group, (one such group is still arguing over 2008 medication protocols¹³ for people abusing opiates) the group should be managed by a full-time international expert and give regular reports to the Oireachtas Health Committee on progress. When Professor Tom Keane was appointed to lead cancer services he made a huge difference to cancer services. We need a Tom Keane for dual diagnosis, someone who will lead a clinical programme to make services better.

A lot of good work has been done already, for example, the report of the HSE Working Group on Residential Treatment & Rehabilitation (Substance Users) and this could be used to inform the working group's discussions. It is crucial that these discussions lead to action.

Set aside a separate fund to develop a culture of continuous improvement and learning

The big problem is that addiction services are so separate to general health care services. While there are many problems in general healthcare, they have a strong culture of learning and innovation and a focus on using evidence to decide what treatments work and what treatments don't work. Many of our treatment services still treat addiction as a moral failing rather than the complex chronic illness that it is.

"Most scientists agree that the genetic, brain and behavioural changes associated with addiction do not appear to be completely reversible, like other chronic illness, most severe cases of addiction can be managed, but not cured with continuing care...addiction treatments shortly will build upon emerging science and will borrow from advances in disease management practices, team treatment methods, tailored treatment planning and continuous patient monitoring that are now common in the management of other chronic illnesses (McLellan). ¹⁴

This approach is very different from how addiction treatment services work, "where it follows our approach or you won't get better." If one type of treatment worked for everybody, that would be ok, but my story and as I've learned countless other peoples' stories is of treatment services not treating people well and worse making people feel guilty because they keep relapsing.

Irish treatment services are not using evidence-based practise to improve their treatments, so we are years behind other countries both in how we treat people with addictions and in tackling the problem of dual diagnosis. So we need to change the culture from one which blames the person with the addiction to one which looks more like McLellan's model I described above.

We don't have to re-invent the wheel; we can learn from other countries which have made progress in tackling this problem.

The Government should establish an annual ring-fenced fund which supports learning and transfer of knowledge amongst all the different people involved in the addiction and mental health community. For example, it could make financial awards to organisations and researchers to cover some of the following areas:

1. An annual conference on treating dual diagnosis with input from international experts. The cost to attend would be low to encourage as many people as possible to attend.
2. The annual conference would also have a separate awards ceremony e.g.
 - a. Best poster presentation by health care students and clinicians.
 - b. Most improved service as measured by service user's real-time feedback.
 - c. Best educational initiative for professional organisations, individual clinicians, clients and their families.
 - d. Best use of technology.
 - e. Best inter-service provider partnership. (because the different service providers will have to work together to treat dual diagnosis)
 - f. Most valuable research project.
 - g. Most strategic development award.
 - h. Most valuable service user contribution.

3. Travel bursary for health care professionals to spend time abroad in dual diagnosis centres of excellence. They must present their findings at the annual conference.

4. Travel bursaries for leading international dual diagnosis practitioners to come and work in services here. Again they would have to present at the annual conference.

5. The research focused on practical aspects of screening, treating and dealing with dual diagnosis.

6. Development of technology which helps to develop screening, identifying, and treating skills. For example, English experts have produced a free online resource to help health professionals improve their understanding of dual diagnosis.

¹⁵

7. Financial awards to service providers who achieve a high enough rating on the dual diagnosis treatment capability framework.

8. Seed funding to help organisations start on the dual diagnosis treatment capability path.

Now this will cost money. I think it would need about €300,000 in the first year, then €500,000 per year for five years to really make a difference. So €2.8 million in total.

In a country where we are cutting back on home help hours for sick, elderly people and special needs assistants for children with disabilities, how can we afford this? Well, the answer is we cannot afford not to because we are simply pouring money down a drain at the moment.

Table 1:1 What alcohol cost me, my family and the taxpayer in euros

Treatment	Cost
Treatment in four different rehabilitation centres; the average cost was between €3,500 to €5,500	€16,000
Private counsellors/therapists/hypnotists	€2,000
20 admissions to hospital each lasting an average of 4 days. It costs €889 per night to stay in a hospital and that does not include the costs of accidents and emergency visits and on one occasion an ambulance was used	€71,120
GP costs	Can't estimate as we can't remember how many times we were there
I didn't drink every day, week, or month but when I did drink I could spend hundreds of euro each time so we think it would have worked out a €80 per week	€41,600
Our best estimate of total costs	€130,720

To make this into a statement; it cost both the State and my husband about €130,720 to cure post-natal depression.

This was only the money cost, it does not include the emotional cost, the pain, and suffering me, my family and friends had. Is it any wonder Thomas was pissed off with the whole lot of it? He was trying to feed his family, keep a roof over our heads, save for college funds and he had this weight bearing down on him. This makes me feel humiliated and embarrassed; all that money wasted or drank while people wait for beds to treat cancer or children suffer while waiting for operations. This has to stop and stop right now!

I was one of the lucky ones, as Thomas kept supporting me, but it's wrong that this happened because treatment services, did not realise I had post-natal depression.

I know I'm not the only one who went through this and you the tax payer are paying the cost. The HSE estimate that nearly one-third of admissions to accident and emergency is due to alcohol abuse. Overall they reckon alcohol abuse is costing Irish society €3.7 billion at a year. ¹⁶

They also say

"Alcohol is the third highest risk factor for premature death and ill-health in the European Union. Alcohol consumption is linked to more than 60 diseases and

conditions, affecting nearly every organ in the human body. Alcohol-related harm is not confined to the negative consequences experienced by the drinker but extends to harm experienced by people other than the drinker (harm to others). The harm from alcohol is linked to a range of health and social problems such as accidents, injuries, chronic ill-health, premature death, public safety, violence, child neglect and marital problems

So why given these really serious problems, why do treatment services not actually treat people properly?

No real figures are available for Ireland, (that's why we use the patient information system I mentioned above), but Cambridge City Council in England calculated that in one client case alone they saved £140,000 by providing an integrated service.

Other Irish figures give an indication of the cost of alcohol abuse alone, let alone other drugs.

*"According to the Chief Medical Officer of Ireland, a 30% reduction in alcohol-related harm would result in a cost saving to the Exchequer of €1 billion."*¹⁷

"Alcohol Action Ireland report"¹¹

- 88 deaths every month in Ireland are directly attributable to alcohol
- One in eleven children in Ireland say parental alcohol use has a negative effect on their lives – that is about 109,684 children
- There are 1,200 cases of cancer each year from alcohol in Ireland
- One in four deaths of young men aged 15-39 in Ireland is due to alcohol
- One in three road crash deaths is alcohol-related."

Now not everybody who abuses alcohol has a dual diagnosis issue or even an addiction problem but many of them will. So surely if a 30% reduction in alcohol-related harm would save the Government one billion euros, if my suggestions only resulted in a reduction in one tenth of one percent of alcohol-related harm they would create savings in exchequer spending in the second year onwards.

So it is in every body's best interest to focus on improving addiction treatment services so that people get the right type of treatment at the first time of asking.

Stories from other People

I include these stories of real people and real families to show my case was not unusual. I've changed the names and some of the details to protect people's privacy.

Ciaran's Story

I knew something was wrong with my unmarried uncle Brian when I met him at a family funeral. He'd always dressed well in expensive clothes, changed every day, was presentable, even when he was drinking; now his clothes were dirty, he seemed to be drooling - he looked like a "down and out".

I decided to see what I could do to help. I'm a business professional, so I'm used to making things happen. It wouldn't be hard for me to lend a helping hand, surely? B' amadán mé (I was a fool).

I soon learnt, in our health services, nothing happens quickly, and different professions don't talk to each other. If you have a mental health illness combined with addiction, you're probably doomed. Trying to organise a case conference where you get all the health professionals in the same room is like pulling teeth. You have to keep ringing, writing, emailing, complaining, keep detailed records, and complain to the Ombudsman before you get anywhere. I must have heard "can you ring back.....," hundreds of time.

Uncle Brian was a complicated case as he had a previous brain injury. It was one from which he had fully recovered; he had even gone back to work. Despite giving up alcohol over 15 years ago, he still suffered from cravings and found it really difficult staying off the drink. Part of the problem in staying off the drink was his depression. He had been on anti-depressants for over 20 years. In all that time he apparently had never seen a counsellor, just psychiatrists, for five minutes now and then to review his prescriptions.

Because of his rough time at school and home as a child because he was dyslexic, Brian was really scared he was "*a bad person who was going to hell.*" In all his time in the mental health services, this belief had never been challenged or addressed. It's easier to throw drugs at people, despite it costing more in the long term.

Uncle Brian died aged 62. Most of his adult life was spent struggling with depression and alcoholism.

Mark's Story

It had been a year since I had come out of residential treatment for alcohol addiction. I spent three months in the treatment centre learning about the damage alcohol does, part of the programme was attending mass every day; daily chores were also given. I did not receive one to one counselling or have any kind of assessment. I had been told that once I gave up the drinking, I would feel better and start to enjoy life. I actually felt worse than I had ever felt.

So I picked out the place where I would take my life and had the tablets organised.

I had not drunk alcohol in that year and the only thing that had stopped me drinking was the Valium and sleeping tablets my doctor prescribed. I could not face going back to my old drinking life but this new sober one wasn't any better, the depression and anxiety were all too much. I just wanted it all to stop.

I broke down one day while having coffee with a friend; my friend gave me a number of a professional counsellor and asked me "please try talking to someone before making any rash decisions"

Two years on, and I'm doing much better. With the help of my counsellor I worked through the underlying problems and realised that along with depression I had social anxiety. I'd describe my experience in the residential treatment centre as:

"It's like if your car broke down, you bring the car to a mechanic. He tells you it has no oil because there is an oil leak. He fills your car back up with oil and sends you on your way. At some point down the road, you are going to break down again because he hasn't fixed the leak."

Mary's Story

I was desperately worried about my mother, Mary. Eight months ago she had attempted to take her own life, she was taken to the hospital and released two days later as she had told the psychiatrist that she had "felt fine" and wanted to go home. The psychiatrist agreed she needed addiction treatment which they did not provide. Mary's original diagnosis of depression was over ten years ago, and this was her third suicide attempt since then.

My Mother had only started drinking two years previously, but it was a big problem, and she had agreed to get help and was due to go into a residential addiction treatment centre. She had been waiting for two weeks for bed. The day before she was to be admitted, the treatment centre phoned to say she was not eligible for their programme. The treatment centre had noticed on her GP referral that she had attempted suicide previously, and they did not "deal with mental health problems."

I spent months with my GP's help emailing and ringing, treatment centres, the mental health commission, my TD to no avail. The Mental Health Commission do not deal with individual cases, the TD sent me some Aware brochures. Eventually, one treatment centre agreed to take my Mother on a week's trial.

I was so relieved that at last, my mother was going to get some help. Sadly the morning my Mother was due to go into the centre she took her own life.

She was 57.

Father Peter McVerry

Father Peter McVerry has been providing accommodation to homeless boys in Dublin since 1979. His understanding of dual diagnosis comes from decades of dealing with homeless boys suffering from addiction in conjunction with one or more mental health issues.

He says, "The holistic needs of the individual are not being addressed. There are too many borders between homelessness, drugs, mental health; you need to be in one category or the other to be dealt with when you are in multiple categories the system breaks down. And it's when you are in 'multiple categories' that you are most in need of assistance. I don't see any joined up thinking, or at least the practical delivery of services in a joined up manner."

He continues, "I'll give you an example. I had a boy stay in the hostel, homeless, with mental health problems and a recovering heroin addict on Methadone treatment. I wanted to seek help for his various issues, so we went to the local hospital – we'll call it hospital A. Now upon learning the boy was homeless, hospital A tells us it cannot treat him and refers us to Hospital B. Hospital B will treat the homeless, but because the boy is on Methadone they cannot provide treatment and refer us to clinic C. Now clinic C would help a homeless boy on Methadone, but they discover he receives his Methadone from a different catchment area, and we are referred to clinic D. However, clinic D has no facilities to treat the serious mental health issues that the boy suffered from.

That boy is now in jail.

In closing, he says, "There are many reports on the importance of multi-disciplinary approaches to treatment, on the importance of patient participation in treatment, on the importance of holistic approaches by varying branches of state and voluntary services; the Government's own literature is peppered with similar ideas and has been for years. But I don't see the delivery of it, the theory is fine and the aspiring to do it is great, but where is the implementation? To put it in the simplest terms if someone has multiple problems you make treatment more difficult by treating each problem in isolation. If the Government actually delivered on its aspirations, in a practical way, the benefits to those in need would be enormous. It would change lives for the better. So I would love to see those promises become reality, but I won't hold my breath."

Concluding Commentary

Valerie Farragher

Concluding Commentary

For all the people who read this book, I hope you get something more from it than just a story. I hope you find knowledge, understanding, and some comfort. If you are suffering yourself or living with someone who is drinking and depressed, I hope you realise you are not alone. There is a help and I beg of you to use caution when seeking help.

Not everyone is qualified. Remember the most expensive does not mean the best and ask plenty of questions! You have every right to leave treatment if you feel it's not working for you and try something else. It's your life. Suicide is never the answer. If I had succeeded in my own suicide, it would have been a significant loss to my family, and then I really would have damaged them. This was the opposite of what I was trying to achieve.

What's next for Valerie?

I now work with women who have alcohol problems and depression. I have put together a programme with the help of many others who are services users and services providers. Most of those who use our service at the moment are women (although this is changing slowly). Why women you might ask? Well, this is simply because there have been some changes in the child protection services and women are afraid to tell other services of their drinking habits in case they lose their children or "bring on" trouble to themselves. I often find these women who think they fall into the category of 'alcoholics' are not addicted and that they use alcohol as a coping mechanism and an anti-depressant.

After I meet them and if I feel I can help, I then pull together the team, and Louise gets the family members on side, so we can all work together at solving what the real problems are. Often it's not the alcohol; it just looks that way.

I am also working on a new book about life after sobriety provisionally called "I'm Sober, I'm Back, Now What?" telling the story of recovery and what needed to be done to set up this service. I am also working on getting two groups going. One is called Smart Recovery and is to quote: to support individuals who have chosen to abstain, or are considering abstinence from any type of addictive behaviours...

The other is called HAMS and is not yet available in Ireland. Allow me to quote thus: The HAMS Harm Reduction Network provides information and support for people who wish to reduce the harm in their lives caused by the use of alcohol or drugs. HAMS neither encourages nor condemns alcohol use or alcohol intoxication. HAMS recognizes recreational intoxication as a reality and seeks to reduce harms associated with it. HAMS believes in the autonomy of the individual and supports each's choice of a vis-a-vis goal alcohol - whether the goal is safer drinking, reduced drinking, or quitting. HAMS supports every positive change. The focus of HAMS is alcohol harm reduction, but users of any substance are welcome. HAMS offers support via live and online groups and provides information via the web and printed page. HAMS support groups are a lay-led and free-of-charge.

If you need help, but you don't want to stop drinking, or you're afraid that you will be sent to rehab then call me. You will get my numbers on the website www.valeriefarragher.com, and I will be able to give you a list of services available

to suit your needs. Because every body need are different. Because We Do Things Differently.

Here are some guidelines I use, and I would like to share them with you:

- Think for yourself. Your gut instinct is usually right, but if it feels wrong then it probably is!
- Replace the words "Sure, I will do that for you" with "Can I get back to you on that" I promise you they will become your mantra words!
- Drink alcohol little and often.
- Share pizza but never chocolate!
- Smoke only after sex (what you smoke is your choice!)
- Never waste time cooking a dinner from scratch on someone who gulps down food. Give them chips if they're that starved!
- If you can't afford it, you shouldn't have it!
- If you have it and still can't afford it, bring it back or sell it!
- Unless you are prepared to eat shit, don't talk it!
- If you get a chance to help, help those who need it.
- Keep going to the next stage, push your comfort zones and doors will open.
- If one door closes and the other is slammed in your face, use a window to climb to the next stage!
- Our brains have a filter for thoughts and memories; decide what to keep and what to throw away.
- Wherever there is a filter, clean it regularly as it will get backed up and stop working if you don't!
- Tell your parents how they helped you before they die, make all their work worth it.
- Find a good therapist and see them at least every six months.
- If at first, you don't succeed, try it a different way.
- If your drinking is causing trouble, fights and stress in your house, then you don't have a family problem, you have a drinking problem!
- Speak up, don't say nothing, change your mind, and change your world!
- Don't try to "sell" it to anyone unless you've used it or tried it yourself.

I know there is a lot of talk about drinking being a culture, and we are never going to stop, but I know we can change. We are human, and we have choices, we are a nation of caring, hardworking people. We had changed before and accepted it, things like the smoking ban, the seatbelt laws, and speeding. If we stay the way we are and continue to drink in the manner we are accustomed to as a nation, we will have bigger problems than you could ever imagine. In the 1970s and 1980s, we started drinking with lower levels of alcohol and look at some of us now. So can you imagine what these teens that are starting on "top shelf" or "alcopops" are going to be drinking in their 40s and 50s?

We also need to mind the mental health side of the alcohol abuse and as I always quote;

"Until we know what troubles the mind, the body count of addiction will continue to rise."

Valerie Farragher

End Notes

[1] Weaver et al. Co-morbidity of substance misuse and mental illness collaborative study. Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine. 2002. This reported that 85% of people with an alcohol problem also had a mental health problem.

2 The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) is published by the American Psychiatric Association and provides a common language and standard criteria for the classification of mental health problems.

3 Coptly, M. (2004) Mental Health in Primary Care, Dublin: Health Service Executive/Irish College of General Practitioners, p.13. found that 68% of GPs had no specific training in mental health. (The HSE has funded a primary care mental health training programme over the last few years, but it is estimated that only around 100 primary care professionals of 3,000 GP's have undergone this training since publication of A Vision for Change)

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7 <http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/reports/3966-42381118.pdf>

8 <http://www.governancecode.ie>

9. The 2009 code of practice for the governance of state bodies

[http://www.governance.ie/reference/code of practice for the governance of state bodies/](http://www.governance.ie/reference/code_of_practice_for_the_governance_of_state_bodies/)

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15 A Thomas McLellan, PHD, CEO and cofounder Treatment research institute. Philadelphia, p.3, Inside Rehab, The surprising truth about addiction treatment – and how to get help that works by Anne M, Fletcher, 2013

16 <http://www.celecoventry.co.uk/projects/dualdiagnosis/>

17<http://alcoholireland.ie/facts/alcohol-related-harm-facts-and-statistics/>

