

*The voice still
shows up.
It just doesn't
win anymore.*



PROLOGUE

The Negotiation

It's a Tuesday evening. The dishes are done. Everyone else has gone upstairs, and the kitchen has that particular late-day quiet to it, the kind where you can hear the refrigerator hum. I'm standing at the counter, and a voice in my head starts up, the same one it always starts up with.

You deserve it. You've worked hard. You've earned something to help you relax.

I want to be clear about something before this book goes any further. This isn't a story about a man who hit a wall and never looked back. That version would be easier to tell and easier to read, but it wouldn't be true, and I promised myself a long time ago that whatever I wrote about this would be true first and inspiring second, if it managed to be inspiring at all. The voice still shows up. It just doesn't win anymore, and understanding the difference between those two facts is most of what this book is actually about.

For most of my adult life, nothing about my drinking looked like a problem. I built a career as a designer. I built a business, then another one. I wrote books, worked with clients, traveled, showed up to meetings prepared and sharp. People relied on me, and I delivered. That's part of what made this so hard to see clearly. When something is obviously broken, the story is simple. You fix it or it fixes you. But when everything is functioning, when you're producing and earning and showing up, there's no clean moment where anyone, including you, is allowed to call it a problem.

There's just a thought. It shows up at night, when things slow down, when the house is quiet and there's nothing left to manage. You're standing in a kitchen with a drink in your hand, and it isn't dramatic or urgent. It's something simpler than that: I don't like how much I think about this. That thought stayed with me for years before I knew what to do with it.

I've always approached life through the lens of design, not just how things look, but how they work, whether something feels intentional or whether it just took shape over time by accident. As a designer, and later as a founder, I spent most of my career asking one question about everything I touched: is this doing what it's supposed to do? Eventually I asked it about a non-alcoholic spirits company I started called Seir Hill, which grew into something real before it was ultimately sold. From the outside, that might have looked like a pivot, a guy who drank, building a business around not drinking. From the inside, it was a continuation of the same question I'd been avoiding asking about myself.

By that point I had spent years trying to fix my relationship with alcohol in small, controlled ways. Only on weekends. Just a couple. Not at home alone. Take a break, reset, start again. Each version felt reasonable. It felt like what a responsible person does when something starts to feel slightly off. And for a while, it worked, until it didn't.

What I didn't understand at the time was that I wasn't dealing with a simple habit. I was dealing with something that had been built into my life. Alcohol had a role. It marked the end of the day. It softened transitions. It made certain situations easier. It gave structure to evenings that might otherwise feel empty. None of that felt extreme on its own. None of it felt like a problem. But taken together, it created something I couldn't ignore: a constant negotiation.

THE QUESTION THAT WOULDN'T RESOLVE

Should I have one. Should I skip tonight. How many is too many. Why did I have that last one. Why am I thinking about this again. That negotiation was the part that stuck, not because it was dramatic, but because it was constant. It never fully stopped, and it never fully escalated either. It just ran in the background, a low hum underneath an otherwise ordinary life.

At some point, the question underneath it shifted. It stopped being do I have a problem and became why is this taking up so much space. That's a different question, and it doesn't require a rock bottom to ask it. If some version of that sounds familiar, there's a good chance you're functioning, showing up, and

your life, on paper, works. But something about alcohol doesn't sit right, not enough to call it a crisis, but enough that it keeps coming back. This book is for that space, the middle, where most people actually live but very few honest conversations happen.

I still hear the voice sometimes. Not about alcohol anymore, usually, but the same voice, testing a different door. It shows up with the same opening line it always used: you deserve it, you've earned this, it's not really the same thing. I've learned to recognize it now the moment it starts negotiating, because that's exactly how it operated for twenty years. Just one. Only socially. Only this once. Every argument built to move me one small step closer to something I already knew wasn't good for me.

The phrase that eventually ended the negotiation for me didn't come from a program or a plan. It came from a moment when the negotiation simply stopped making sense. Not because I forced it to stop. Because I had seen enough. It wasn't a rule, and it wasn't a restriction I had to maintain through willpower. It was a conclusion.

None for me.

That's where this book is headed, not as a slogan, but as an actual ending to an actual negotiation that ran for twenty years. Before we get there, though, I want to take you back to where it started: a folding chair, a windowless basement, and a version of me who was doing everything he'd been told to do, and still couldn't understand why none of it felt like it fit.



PART I

The Room that Doesn't Fit

*The room was full,
but I was empty*



CHAPTER 1

The Introvert in the Circle

HIGH-FUNCTIONING, SUCCESSFUL, STILL UNEASY

For most of the years I drank, nothing about my life looked like a problem. I ran a design agency. I built a non-alcoholic spirits company from a kitchen-table idea into something that ended up on real shelves and was eventually acquired. I showed up to client meetings prepared. I caught flights, gave talks, closed deals, coached my daughters' teams, made the school pickup line more often than not. If you had run a background check on my life during those years, you would not have found the kind of evidence that makes people intervene. You would have found a man who was, by almost any outside measure, doing fine.

That was part of the problem. Not the drinking itself. The fact that it never looked like enough of a problem to justify the thing I already suspected: that I needed to stop.

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from managing something well enough that no one else ever has to know about it. I could have two drinks before a work dinner and still land every point I needed to land. I could stay up too late after a launch, feel it in my body the next morning, and still run the meeting like a man who'd slept fine. I got good at it. Not proud of it, exactly, but good at it, the way you get good at anything you do often enough. And because I was good at it, I kept telling myself the story that the goodness was proof: this isn't that bad, or I'd be worse at hiding it.

The moment I remember most clearly wasn't dramatic. It was late on a Tuesday, kitchen quiet except for the dishwasher running, my wife and kids asleep, a glass in my hand that was not my first. I wasn't in crisis. I wasn't about to lose anything. I was standing in my own kitchen thinking one plain, unglamorous sentence: I don't like how much I think about this.

That's it. That's the whole moment. No rock bottom, no scene, nobody finding out. Just a thought I couldn't talk myself out of, arriving in a life that otherwise worked.

If you're a professional, an executive, someone who runs a team or a business or a household that depends on you functioning, you already know what I mean. You can be hungover at your kid's Saturday game and still be the loudest one cheering. You can be a little rattled the morning after a client dinner that ran long and still nail the follow-up call. The machine keeps running, so you assume the system underneath it is sound.

Being uneasy becomes one more thing to manage, filed next to your inbox and your calendar, instead of something you let yourself actually look at.

This book starts here, with you, not with a crisis. Not because a crisis doesn't matter, but because most of the people I hear from never had one, or didn't think theirs counted. They had a version of what I had: a life that worked on paper and a private, specific, oddly persistent discomfort that never fully explained itself and never fully went away. If that's you, I'm not going to spend this book convincing you that things are worse than you think. I'm going to take the thing you already know, quietly, at eleven at night in your own kitchen, and treat it as data instead of a personality flaw.

THE TRANSACTION OF CONNECTION

The unease I just described is what eventually put me in a folding chair in a church basement, because that's where I'd been told people like me were supposed to go.

The room was full, but I was empty. The basement smelled like burnt coffee and the kind of industrial cleaner they use in elementary schools. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, never quite steady, throwing a tired, even glare over a loose circle of metal chairs. A stack of styrofoam cups sat next to a half-empty box of powdered creamer on a folding table someone had clearly set up a thousand times before. Nothing in the room felt chosen. It felt borrowed, the way a rented conference space feels borrowed, except this was supposed to be the place I rebuilt my life.

Anonymity, I remember thinking, might actually work in my favor. I could sit quietly, listen, drink the bad coffee, and disappear back into my car. Nobody in that room needed to know my name, my job, or how far things had actually gone. I wasn't ready to tell my wife everything. I certainly wasn't ready to tell my clients. I could barely admit it to myself in full sentences. But I could sit in a room of strangers who only knew me as the guy who drank too much, and for a while, that felt like enough.

The program does not let you stay on the edges for long, though. Alcoholics Anonymous is built around connection, and not the optional kind. After you admit what's going on, the next expectation arrives almost immediately: you need a sponsor. You can't do this alone. You have to reach out. Nobody presented these as suggestions. They were delivered as facts, with the calm certainty of people who had been exactly where I was and had made it out the other side.

So I tried. I stood around after meetings and traded numbers with men whose only real connection to me was a shared inability to keep our drinking inside the lines. A plumber. A retired banker. A couple of guys about my age, a couple twice it. Outside the meeting, our lives didn't overlap at all. Inside it, we were supposed to be each other's lifeline. The connection wasn't relational. It was functional, the way you're connected to whoever else is in the stairwell during a fire drill.

At first, I didn't question it. When you're drowning, you don't critique the shape of the life raft. But over time, the

transactional nature of it started to wear on me in a way I couldn't quite name at first. I didn't feel like I was building anything with these men. I felt like I'd been enrolled in a system, and the daily check-in was the part that wore hardest. The rule was simple: text your sponsor, or someone in the program, every day, just to confirm you hadn't slipped. My message always meant the same thing. I didn't drink today. The reply always meant the same thing back. Good. Keep going.

It felt less like friendship and more like checking in with a parole officer. There was no curiosity behind it, no real interest in how my week had actually gone, no room for the parts of my life that had nothing to do with alcohol. I wanted to talk about my daughters. About the pressure of running a business with my name on it. About the low hum of anxiety that followed me through most ordinary days, with or without a drink in my hand. Instead, every conversation curved back to the same single subject. I had traded an obsession with drinking for an obsession with not drinking, and the amount of real estate alcohol occupied in my head hadn't shrunk. It had just changed shape.

The walls of the basement were still in my head, even when I wasn't in the basement.

THE PROBLEM WITH FORCED VULNERABILITY

For some people, the constant sharing works. It builds momentum. It feels like exposure therapy for isolation, and for the people it's built for, it genuinely is. I want to be careful here, because this isn't a chapter about AA failing everyone. It worked

for people I love. What I'm describing is what it did to me specifically, and to a fairly specific type of person: the one who processes internally before they process out loud, who finds a circle of strangers asking for real-time honesty less like relief and more like being handed a microphone before you've finished forming the thought.

Vulnerability, when you choose the time and the person, builds trust. Vulnerability, when it's a condition of belonging to the group, starts to feel like a performance you're required to give on schedule. I learned the tone the room wanted. Broken, but hopeful. Ashamed, but grateful. I got good at hitting those two notes in the right order. And the better I got at performing it, the further I felt from whatever I was actually supposed to be healing.

Nobody in that room was doing anything wrong. This is simply how the structure works, and it works beautifully for a lot of people. It just adds a second layer of exhaustion for the rest of us. If you're wired to think before you speak, you already spend a lot of energy translating what's happening inside you into language you can say out loud. AA asks you to do that translation constantly, in public, on a fixed schedule, whether the words are ready or not. What gets sold as radical honesty can start to feel, for a certain kind of person, like an assignment you never get to turn in late.

THE IDENTITY PROBLEM

There's a smaller ritual inside AA that did more to reshape how I saw myself than almost anything else in the program, and it happened every single meeting, in the first five seconds.

"I'm Brian, and I'm an alcoholic."

The intent behind that sentence is humility. Say it enough times and your ego supposedly stays in check. You never get to believe you're cured. I understand the reasoning, and for a lot of people, that structure is exactly what keeps them grounded. But every time I said it, I reinforced one specific axis of who I was, and it didn't matter what else I built that year. It didn't matter that I'd landed a new client or fixed something broken at home or gone four months without a single slip. The headline stayed the same. This is who you are. Permanently.

I didn't want to spend the rest of my life introducing myself by the thing I was trying to leave behind. I wanted to be a father who didn't drink, a husband who showed up fully, a business owner who didn't structure his calendar around when he'd next get to unwind. But the language of the room insisted the past had to stay the headline, every time, forever. Sobriety, inside that framework, isn't an identity you grow into. It's a permanent wound you learn to manage out loud.

That distinction sat with me longer than I expected it to.

WHY TRADITIONAL RECOVERY LANGUAGE DOESN'T FIT

Here's something I didn't understand for a long time: the words themselves were part of what kept me stuck.

Recovery language, the traditional kind, is built for catastrophe. It assumes collapse. It assumes you're introducing yourself in a basement because everything finally broke at once, and that the sentence you're about to say out loud is the honest, humbling truth of your situation. If that's not quite your story, the words start to feel like a costume that doesn't fit, even while something real is clearly wrong.

“Alcoholic.” “In recovery.” “Clean.” These are heavy words, and they carry real history. For some people they're the exact right size. For me, they were too big for what I could honestly say and too small for what I actually meant. My drinking had done damage, but most of it was private. I wasn't waking up in a stranger's car. I was waking up in my own bed, next to my own wife, trying to reconstruct exactly how much I'd had and how I'd behaved the night before. Calling that “in recovery” felt oversized. Calling it “fine” felt like a lie. There was no available language for the actual sentence I needed: I'm functioning, and I still don't like the role alcohol has in my life.

If you run a business or a household or a team, you're used to language meaning something specific. You wouldn't call a profitable company “failing” just because it's underperforming. You'd say, this isn't working the way we want, and then you'd go fix the design. Recovery culture doesn't usually offer that middle setting. It tends to jump straight from nothing to see

here to I am powerless and my life is unmanageable, and if you don't feel powerless in most areas of your life, that gap is wide enough to make you say nothing at all rather than try to explain where you actually are.

THE GAP IN THE CONVERSATION

Look for help with drinking and you'll generally land in one of two places. On one end, there's traditional recovery language: meetings, sponsors, a lifetime identity, a fixed vocabulary for what happened to you. On the other end, there's a much softer conversation about “mindful drinking” or taking a break for a month, written in the same tone as advice about step counts and sleep trackers. One end assumes your life has become unmanageable. The other end assumes you're optimizing a habit. If your life still looks intact and the discomfort is real anyway, neither one quite describes where you are.

That gap is where a lot of the people who write to me actually live. Men with careers, mortgages, marriages, kids in travel soccer, degrees on the wall, who are quietly exhausted from holding two things at once: the version of themselves that has it together, and the version that doesn't like how much they think about their next drink. They don't want to stand up in a basement and adopt a label for the rest of their life. They also don't want another article telling them to alternate a glass of water with their beer. What they want is much simpler than either option: someone willing to say, this in-between place is real, and you're allowed to take it seriously without inflating your story to earn the right.

BELIEF CHALLENGE: “AA IS THE ONLY PATH”

This is worth naming directly, because I believed it for a long time, and believing it kept me stuck longer than the drinking itself did.

AA has kept people alive. It has held families together, given people a circle when they had nowhere else to sit, and it remains, for millions of people, the reason they're still here. None of what I'm about to say is meant to argue with that. I've watched it work for people I love, and I'm not interested in taking that away from anyone it's working for.

But “AA is the only real path to sobriety” is a belief, not a fact, and it survives mostly because it's the most visible option, not because it's been proven to be the only effective one. It's the version most people picture when they picture recovery at all: church basement, folding chairs, twelve steps, a sponsor. That visibility does a lot of quiet work. It convinces people that if this particular structure doesn't fit them, the problem must be their commitment, not the fit between the structure and their particular mind. I spent two decades operating on that assumption. It took me a long time to consider a much simpler possibility: that I wasn't failing a method built for everyone. I was using a method that was never built for me specifically, and there were others.

You'll find the full range of those others later in this book, laid out without a ranking system attached. For now, the only thing I want you to sit with is smaller: the fact that a path has helped the most people does not make it the only path that works. It makes it the loudest one.

WHO I'M REALLY TALKING TO

This isn't a chapter against Alcoholics Anonymous. I want to say that plainly, because it would be easy to read the last few pages and assume otherwise. AA has helped millions of people stay alive long enough to rebuild something worth living in. It has kept parents present for their kids and partners from disappearing entirely. Some of the people I respect most still call those rooms home, and nothing in this book is written to take that away from them.

I'm writing to someone more specific. The person who showed up even when it was the last place they wanted to be. Who got a sponsor, worked the steps, tried honestly, and still ended up back at day one more times than they can count without wincing. The person who has collected sober dates the way other people collect scars, who has sat in a parked car afterward wondering what's wrong with me that this isn't working, who has apologized the next morning and privately sworn, this time I'm getting serious, and quietly suspects that if the most trusted system in the world didn't stick, the defect has to be them.

If that's you, I want to say this as clearly as I know how: you are not broken. You're not too proud, too weak, too selfish, or too resistant. You may simply have been standing in the wrong room for the way your mind works, trying to heal in a structure that asked more of your particular wiring than it was built to give. Your struggle isn't proof that you're unfixable. It's evidence that the fit was off.

There are other rooms. Quieter ones, for people who think before they talk. Rational ones, built on evidence instead of surrender. Secular ones, for the skeptics. Digital ones, for people who need a screen between themselves and a stranger before they can say anything true. Faith-based ones that look nothing like a basement. Medical paths. Paths you build yourself out of pieces that happen to fit your actual life.

This book isn't asking you to reject recovery. It's asking you to take back authorship of it, to stop trying to squeeze yourself into a story that was handed to you, and start writing one that matches the way your mind, your body, and your actual life work. That's the negotiation we're going to spend this book ending, one piece at a time. Not the negotiation over whether to drink tonight. The much older one: whether you're allowed to define recovery on your own terms in the first place.