

The First Step

By

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Cast of Characters

<u>John:</u>	An early 20s male. Despondent and frustrated.
<u>Paul:</u>	47 year old male. Holds himself in high regard.
<u>Louise:</u>	Female, 23 years old. A disheveled waitress and a free spirit. She's quite young.
<u>Susan:</u>	Female in her 50s. Dressed well, but modest. She appears welcoming, but can be very cold.
<u>Tom:</u>	40 years old. Male. He's a father of two kids, they're his life when he's sober. quick tempered.
<u>Al:</u>	Al is 35 and male, and runs the AA meetings with as little effort as possible. This is his job, not his life.

Scene

The stage is a meeting room, where the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting takes place. There are several different color chairs and a whiteboard upstage right. There can be a refreshments table if desired.

Time

Present Day, in the evening on a week night.

Darkness.

The theater is submerged in loud jarring car crash cacophony.

Silence...

...and then a voice--

JUDGE:

(voice only)

Jonathan Erickson, on account of first-offense driving under the influence on the night of February 4th, 2015, with the consideration that nobody was injured and only a minor amount of property damage occurred, you are hereby sentenced to forty-eight hours in the county jail, a ninety day license suspension, six months of community service, and enrollment in an alcohol prevention program for a minimum of fourteen weeks.

The gavel strikes.

Dim lights rise center-stage to reveal a semi-circle of colored chairs facing down-stage, several of which are occupied by familiar guests murmuring. A whiteboard upstage-right reads "Alcoholics Anonymous." In each chair from stage-right to left: PAUL, TOM, SUSAN, an empty chair, LOUISE, and AL.

Spotlight on JOHN outside the door. As JOHN wanders in all lights brighten up, it's clear everyone notices him except for AL.

PAUL

Hey, come on in.

AL

(startled by John's appearance)

Oh, welcome to Alcoholics Anonymous! You must be John.

John intentionally ignores the greeting and plops himself into the empty chair between Susan and Louise. Louise and Susan are sympathetic to his belligerence.

AL

So... are you John?

JOHN

(shrugging)

Yeah, whatever. I've got this court order.

JOHN reaches into his coat pocket to pull out a crumpled paper and passes it to AL. AL flattens it out as he continues--

AL

...I'm sorry. I just assumed you're John because there's only supposed to be one new person today and so--

JOHN

I'm John. Now would you just shut up?

AL

(timidly)

...well I mean I'm leading this shindig. So, no?

SUSAN

Take it easy on the kid, Al. He's new.

JOHN

I'm not a kid.

LOUISE

That's not what she meant.

Beat.

PAUL interjects.

PAUL

Hey John. My name is Paul. Usually when we get a new member, we each share our testimonies. So why don't we get started? Susan?

She adjusts herself in her chair.

SUSAN

ahem Hello, my name is Susan. I have been coming here for... oh, six months now. I am an alcoholic. My life growing up was pretty uneventful. I suppose that I mean to say there was nothing that happened to me that I can place the blame on for becoming an alcoholic.

PAUL

We have only ourselves to blame.

SUSAN

In college I started drinking... and I never stopped. It was fun, and it was fine. I wish I could say I ruined my brother Garrett's wedding reception, or that I showed up trashed to *both* of my parents' funerals, and perhaps my brother sees it that way. Honestly, I probably did, but the truth is I was complacent. and

(MORE)

SUSAN (cont'd)

apparently that was enough... enough to convince Garrett that he didn't want me in his life anymore. He's the only family I have left and we live in the same town for Pete's sake! Last week I ran into him at the Safeway and he wouldn't even look at me. I called out to him and as soon as he noticed it was me, he walked the other way. Didn't even say hello. It was embarrassing. To be treated that way in public. I'm trying to change, and if he just gave me a chance to explain, he would know that. There isn't a specific day I remember needing to quit drinking, but I do remember my first meeting here. I wandered in to AA after picking up a brochure, and when I got here Paul was sitting right there. Without Paul's help, I wouldn't be here today.

PAUL

You wandered in here lost and alone. But together we've found a way. But the path doesn't stop there, Susan.

Beat. She tears up.

SUSAN

I left a phone message for Garrett that I quit drinking and that I want him in my life. I need him in my life. It kills me inside. Growing up, we were so close, and it hurts to have changed and still feel his disdain for me. How do you make amends with someone that doesn't want you to?

AL

(*uselessly*) Keep trying, Susan.

Beat.

LOUISE

I'm sure he'll come around soon. I mean, you've been calling him for about a month now, right?

SUSAN

Yes.

PAUL

Susan, sometimes it's hard. I know he means a lot to you. But for your own sake, if it really comes down to it, you may have to come to terms with never being forgiven.

AL

I wouldn't necessarily agree with that. You should really try to stick with making amends before moving on to the next step.

PAUL

You're not wrong. At the same time though, Susan you have to remember that at the end of the day this is about you, not him. You've got to be able to continue living a new life. Don't let your past be an infinite hindrance.

Beat.

TOM

I guess I'll go next. Howdy. My name's Tom. I am an alcoholic. This'll be my fourth month in the program and I gotta say I've come along ways since I first got here. I'm pretty quick-tempered sometimes. And alcohol doesn't help that so much. And sometimes, that means I get... well I've gotten rough with my family before. Apparently this one time, probably the worst time, my wife started getting really nervous. I came home totally plastered and we started getting in some kind of fight in the kitchen. So I start throwing shit around, breakin' a carton of eggs on the wall, and just... it was a mess, you know? I don't think I would have hurt her, but maybe I would have, somehow. She pulls a knife out of the block and starts holding it up at me because she said she was tired of my shit and this was it. She manages her way around me and made it over to the kids. She takes them and she locks herself in the bathroom with them. I remember, I could hear them all crying on the other side of the door. And, I don't know. Part of me thinks all I wanted to do was talk, that she wasn't listening to me.

(*choking up*) I... I started punching a whole through the door. It was one of those cheap knock-off wood cardboard doors, so I made a pretty big whole through the damn thing. What I didn't realize was she was leaning against it sitting on the floor, holding my daughter. I hit 'em. I hit 'em both.

John scoots up, uneasy.

My daughter, she starts cryin' and more than anything, I just remember hating myself. I took off to a cheap motel, where I stayed for a week on account of my wife not letting me come back. After that I crashed at friends' couches for a while till I dragged my sorry ass here and finally got myself straightened out. I gotta say though, Paul really pulled me up on my feet. I mean, hell, after the first month he even helped me move back in with my family! My wife was pretty hesitant at first, but Paul talked about the program and convinced her that havin' her in my life would only make the process easier. And I gotta say I'm doin' great. Hell, I ain't proud of what I did, but all I can do is move forward, ya know? The best part is, I

(MORE)

TOM (cont'd)
actually enjoy bein' around my kids now. And they're finally startin' to treat me like their father.

AL
As they should. You have every right to be their father. But you need to keep coming. I think the more you focus on your alcoholism, the easier it will be to control your anger.

SUSAN
I'm not sure about your first point, Al. Tom, you're here because you care about your children, about your family. You need to be absolutely certain that they are safe. We've talked before about why should never have tried to hit your wife in the first place, but you need a contingency plan. Now that you're on good terms with your wife, you should sit down with her and talk about a plan for the next time you might get upset.

TOM
I feel like I'm in a good place, though. Like I aint drinkin' or nothin' and my family is pretty happy now. I don't wanna focus too much on somethin' that could remind them of what I did, not when things are goin' so well. Look, I'm sober now.

PAUL
Well, Tom you can be sober and angry. I feel you have a tendency towards anger, with or without the alcohol. We have to accept who we are before we can change. It's the first step.

TOM
Thanks Paul.

PAUL maintains the momentum.

PAUL
Louise? I know you haven't been here very long, but go ahead and do your best.

LOUISE nods and looks to JOHN, offering her hand. JOHN notices, but pretends not to before giving in.

LOUISE
Hi, I'm Louise. I've only been here for about three weeks, but... I guess I'm here because I just can't really control myself. I love drinking, I really do. Except last month I, uh, I woke up in a hotel bathroom somewhere... uptown? It was that place on the corner of fifth, the really tall fancy one, and I'm like, on the
(MORE)

LOUISE (cont'd)
twelfth floor. I don't know I don't really remember too much about the place.

TOM
The Marriott.

LOUISE
What.

TOM
It's the Marriott Hotel. On the corner of fifth.

LOUISE
Uh, yeah. Sure. Anyway, I started the night at some R and B concert across town and somehow made my way all the way to the Marriott, and at this point it must be like 2 AM. So I wake up to chunks of vomit in my hair and like an art gallery of sharpie drawn all over my face. So I walk out of the bathroom, and my clothes are on the floor. I wore my favorite dress that night and it was just soaked in champagne.

SUSAN
What a shame.

LOUISE
I mean yeah... but it washed out. I'm not ashamed of any of it to be honest with you. But I walked through the room and out onto this great big balcony, and I could see the whole city and it's like 3 PM. And I looked down and in front of the hotel is that awesome fountain. Like the one with the horses and shit and water coming out of their mouths. Anyway, I don't know what it is. Something about standing there on the deck maybe? The fresh air, I don't know. But it just hit me. I'm not ashamed right now, but what's going to happen when I do something I am ashamed of? So I gave up. It was perfect.

Beat.

Except I guess that night I went for a swim in the horse fountain and started vomitting. I hate it. Nobody must have seen, but the funny thing about fancy hotels is they've got great security cameras. And the fucking video made its way online, of course. Like, fuck! What a shitty way to forever remind myself that I never want to drink again.

JOHN laughs a little.

LOUISE

Yeah, real funny right? Except most of my friends bring it up all the time. Maybe that's good. Like, hanging out with them was what lead me to drinking so much in the first place. Hell, they're probably the ones that drew all over my face. It's just... you know when people wake up and say "I'm never drinking again" after a shitty night? Well when I think of that, that stupid video just plays over and over in my mind, on infinite repeat. I'm here and yes, the first step is admittance. Sure, *I'm an alcoholic*. I've never been a christian or anything, though. So I'm kind of struggling with step two right now.

It's clear John is more interested in Louise than anyone else. She's young, he's young. Maybe this meeting isn't pointless.

JOHN

What's step two?

LOUISE

Oh, it's deciding that there's some higher power that "can restore us to sanity."

She motions quotes with her fingers.

JOHN

Hmph.

AL

Well, it's kind of a serious thing. And I'm sure you're going to find some form of a higher power that you can, uh, wrap your head around.

PAUL

Here's the thing about accepting a higher power, like God. We struggle in our own lives to find a purpose. Basically your purpose shouldn't, or can't, be a goal. When you make your purpose a goal, what happens when you reach that Goal?

TOM

You reach your purpose?

SUSAN

You lose it.

PAUL

Exactly, Susan! Once you reach that goal, you no longer have a purpose. We're all alcoholics here. But our goal is not to stop being alcoholics. Instead we aim to live a life without alcohol.

LOUISE

Okay, but isn't that the same thing? And what does that have to do with God.

SUSAN

I think what Paul is trying to say is that you will always be an alcoholic, even if you stop drinking. Setting an end date for your alcoholism fails because once you reach that goal, there's nothing stopping you from going back. Every day is a constant struggle.

PAUL

Thank you Susan. God comes into it in the sense that a relationship with God--

LOUISE

Or a higher power.

PAUL

(continuously) is an on going journey that never ends. So there is no termination to your purpose in life. Your purpose becomes serving God, and serving yourself, rather than some goal to be reached. Does that make sense?

LOUISE

I mean, yes and no. Like, I get that we need to serve ourselves, but doesn't that mean we'll never reach a goal?

AL

I got this one, Paul. Our goals still serve a purpose, Louise, but they aren't the focal point, or a cornerstone I guess. Removing that goal won't bring the building down.

PAUL

(confident)

Al, John might still be a little uncomfortable. Why don't I go?

AL

Okay, sure.

John looks up to Paul, with an intrigued glare, recognizing his face, but still rather uncertain of who the man is.

PAUL

(Rehearsed)

I've been coming here for twelve years, and it hasn't been easy. I finished the program a long time ago, but I keep coming back for all of you. Truthfully, I love

(MORE)

PAUL (cont'd)
 you guys--and girls-- and I owe it to you all after the life I've lived. I'm a walking talking second chance. (chuckles). Anyway, about thirteen years ago I was a train wreck, a functional drunk. My daily routine consisted of twelve to sixteen cans of beer a day. I remember I used to grab a six pack, drink two cans at breakfast, and take the rest with me in my truck to drink on the way to work. I'd crush the cans and hide 'em under the seat just in case I would get pulled over, which unfortunately I never did. One morning I was reaching for another can on the passengers seat and I didn't see the light turn red. The next thing I know I'm t-boning a station wag--

PAUL's past catches up with JOHN's present. JOHN leaps from his seat at PAUL. JOHN shouts. PAUL stands up in defense. JOHN's momentum sends them to the floor. JOHN is strattled over PAUL, and attempts to throw a punch, but TOM and LOUISE intervene by restraining his arms. AL nudges his chair backwards to avoid the tussle.

JOHN
 You killed her! You fucking killed her!

TOM
 What're you talking about John. Try to calm down.

JOHN
 (trying to shake his arms loose) AAAH!! You think you can sit around and... bullshit about your life! I hate you!

SUSAN
 What in God's name is he talking about, Paul?

PAUL
 (with revelation) Jonathan Erickson.

AL and LOUISE pull JOHN off with difficulty. PAUL stands up.

PAUL
 It's you.

JOHN
 Don't give me that shit. You knew who I was the second I walked through that door! You. You standing there trying to be some fucking saint! Of course I didn't recognize you.

AL

(frantic) Can someone tell me what's going on!?

JOHN

Go ahead Paul. Tell the truth! You murdered my mom you son of a bitch!

PAUL

They know my story, John. Everybody, look. I wrecked my car into a station wagon. John's mom was in that wagon. The crash killed her.

JOHN

You killed my mom and you wrecked my life!

TOM

John, what Paul did was an accident.

PAUL

(shocked, taken aback)
...John, I am so sorry.

JOHN

You know, the judge sent me here because he thought I have an alcohol problem. But really, the only *problem* I have is you.

SUSAN

John, please just sit down. We can work this out another way.

JOHN

(yelling)
You think a bunch of programs where you sit around and talk is going to bring my mother back? Do you really think that talking to a *bunch of drunks* is gonna change what you did. Nah, you're a pile of shit you know that!? This isn't some second chance Act-of-God cookie cutter ending for you, and it *never* will be!

PAUL

John, I don't know what to say. We aren't just a bunch of drunks. That's why we come here. Maybe what I did to your mom was unforgiveable, but I've come here for the last ten years to make sure that it never happens again.

JOHN

Yeah? Well for four of those years my mom was lifeless in a coma while my dad cried in the corner. I can't even go home because of how much my sister reminds me of her. You wanna believe sitting around will keep it from happening again? Look at me Paul; *it's happening right now.*

AL

John, try to calm down. I don't think *killing* Paul is the answer to your problems.

PAUL

Do it.

TOM

What?

PAUL

Let him go. He's right. I don't deserve to be here. I didn't do the right thing. I failed you, John. And I live with that every single day. But if that's not enough for you, then it's not enough for me. So do it. Hit me.

AL

But Paul, that's not how we handle things here. Step Nine: make amends unless it causes you or others injury.

PAUL

I know that. But I finished the program ages ago, and here I am standing, and somehow I never made amends with you John. So go ahead. Louise, Tom, let him go. If it makes you happy John, hit me.

LOUISE and TOM let go of JOHN's arms, while remaining concerned for PAUL's well-being. JOHN's eyes are locked on PAUL as he prepares himself. He raises his fist and cocks his arm back, and freezes. He desperately wants to hit PAUL, but he can't.

JOHN

You... you killed her!

JOHN collapses into a chair, and LOUISE and SUSAN come to his aid as he begins to sob. SUSAN rubs his back.

SUSAN

John.

Beat.

Shhhh... It's okay. You're okay.

JOHN

No.