BEYOND MY *WILDEST* DREAMS

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A SUPERNATURAL RECOVERY STORY

J. ALEXANDER

For Mrs. Clancy. You were right.

I've been through some terrible things in my life.
Some of which have actually happened.

—**MARK TWAIN**
(Thinking of you, Steve B.)





PART ONE



1

ROCK BOTTOM

Hello. My name is Sage, and I'm an alcoholic. I'd like to tell you a story, if you would be so kind as to indulge me.

I know, I know. You're busy. Everyone seems to be busy these days. Too busy, really. But this story is an important one, and if there is anyone that is short of time, it's me. You see, I'm dying. And while you may think, "We are all dying, bud," what I mean to say is, I'm *acutely* dying. By nightfall tomorrow, I'll no longer be around. I will have vanished into thin air. And hopefully—no, not hopefully, I am certain of it—this text will find you and be of use to you, and to those around you.

The reason this might interest you is because I am, in fact, the most unlikely reincarnation of the Buddha that ever existed. The one who went from being a pain-in-the-ass drunk, a nemesis to those around him, to a fully enlightened being. This, my friends, is my improbable story. Brought to you straight from the horse's mouth on the eve of his death, thanks to the marvels of modern technology and voice transcription. I've asked my friends to keep this story safe, so that it may be delivered to you firsthand and unadulterated. And while it is a story that I am yearning to tell, I realize it is not just *my* story. It's a shared story. One of how we can all help each other move toward a better world.

We live in some dark times. Thankfully, wherever there is dark, there must be light. You know, I met a friend who once remarked to me, "You can't get rid of the dark by erasing it, wishing it away, or willing it away. The only way to get rid of the dark is to let the light in." That friend of mine is a very wise man. His name is Jerry K., and he is my sponsor. He guided me through the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and steered my recovery. I am forever indebted to him. He showed me a path of light, one that illuminated the darkness in my life. And then—honest to God, I swear—a miracle happened.

Now, there's no shortage of talk of miracles in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. Take, for instance, Miracle Mike. He begins every share by saying, "A miracle happened in my life when God plucked me from my knees and dropped me in the chairs of Alcoholics Anonymous." Or Miracle Lyle—who sometimes went by Doc Lyle, or simply Doc, since he was a retired physician—who began his shares with the following: "You know, there's been a miracle happening in my life every night for the past sixty years. I put my head down on my pillow when I go to bed at night, and I'm sober. And it's followed by another miracle the next morning. I wake up, sober."

You hear these guys share enough—the same thing, day in and day out—and you might begin to believe in miracles. Eventually, I came to believe, too, though I was highly skeptical at first (if I'm being entirely honest). After all, I'm an Ivy League–educated teacher; I thought there was a scientific explanation for everything. But what is a man to believe when the inexplicable begins to happen? If we are to cling to dogma, let us at least hold on to this: There is much that science has yet to explain. Dark matter, for one. The origin of life, for another. Or even the butterfly, an insect that mysteriously originates from a caterpillar through a process of metamorphosis we don't fully understand and yet take for granted. I, for one, had no idea how my body began its metamorphosis into a blue-skinned, bald human being with emerald eyes (I've come to think of myself as a sort of *creature*, really). *But it happened*. And as of now, I'm alive to tell the story.

And as for that story: As the AAs say, I'm here to tell you what I used to be like, what happened, and what it's like now. Where does my story begin? Where does any story begin, really? I suppose we should start at the bottom. My bottom, that is. My rock bottom. Here, suffice it to say that if you're looking for a climactic, monumental, earth-shattering moment that resulted in a revolutionary epiphany, I am sorry to disappoint. My rock bottom moment was—like my enlightenment—ever so slightly on the other side of ordinary. Which is to say, it was a day like any other: full of remorse, shame, disbelief, and a fair share of vomiting.

Now, a word on rock bottoms. When it comes to this pivotal moment in recovery, I've got another friend, Mike D.—not to be confused with Miracle Mike—who has a habit of saying this about rock bottoms: "It's a misconception that everyone in AA has a different rock bottom. In actuality, everyone's rock bottom is the same, just shrouded in different circumstance." He goes on to say that the commonality shared by all these "rock bottoms" is that they are the point at which we finally surrender. When we reach out for help. When we've had enough.

For me, that day was July 9, 2017. I came to from a blackout on my living room couch, my arm numb from being draped over the side of the sofa all night. I had a vague recollection of the night before; mainly what was imprinted into my memory was the sight of Kelly, the bartender from my favorite neighborhood pub, turning his back on me as the pub's bathroom door swung shut. That was about as much as I could piece together. That, and the fact that I was looking up at the door when it was swinging shut. Which meant that I was on the floor for some reason. So there I was, on the bathroom floor, with Kelly walking out on me. And then I awoke on the living room couch the next morning. There were a few other flashes that would eventually come to me—throwing back a few shots, the Phillies-Padres game on television, an argument with someone next to me—but none of it added up to anything meaningful.

As was customary, I surveyed the room to make sure there were no major red flags. No blood. No strangers. I looked myself up and down and found no new scrapes, cuts, or bruises. I was in one piece. Physically, at least. My emotional and spiritual states were an altogether different matter.

I was naked, save for some tattered boxer briefs that had holes but an elastic waistband that was stubbornly passing the test of time. My clothes were, unsurprisingly, tossed around the room in haphazard fashion. A shirt here, an undershirt there, pants strewn over the chair. They found the company of my other clothes that had been similarly tossed aside in past blackouts. I suppose it was my idea of a loosely arranged closet. But in reality it was more like small heaps of dog shit, which aligned with my overall state of mind.

As I hauled myself off the sofa, I spotted a bottle of whiskey laying on its side by my feet. It was eyeing back at me, nearly empty. Nearly, but not entirely. It was Jameson. My dear, sweet friend and confidant, Jameson. He had been by my side, both literally and figuratively, for so many years now. I picked up what was left of the bottle and downed it. The old hair-of-the-dog technique had never steered me wrong before, and I was sure hoping it would work now.

My hangovers were always horrific. My body had learned to adapt to larger and larger quantities of alcohol. But regardless of how my tolerance to booze grew, my resistance to hangovers couldn't keep pace. The terms "splitting" or "blinding" are words that are inadequate to describe the sensation of a marching band plowing through your head while your insides feel like they're being whirled about in a 3.5-horsepower blender and your mouth is stuffed with cotton. You would think that this would be enough to turn me away from alcohol. And it would—for a few hours, at least. Then I'd be right back at it. That's what an alcoholic does, after all. He can stop, but can't stay stopped.

As I polished off the remnants of Lord Jameson, hoping he would ease some of the pain, a scene from the previous night came flooding back to me. It happened like that sometimes. Jarring memories buried somewhere in the brain, floating to the surface at unpredictable times.

A vivid memory of Kelly standing over me in the bathroom before he walked out. He was reading me the riot act in that thick Irish accent of his. These words I remember most: "You're a waste of flesh. You're a piece of shit, a hopeless drunk. I've had enough of your goddamn self-pity. Now get the fuck out of my bar." His voice was eerily low. He was angry, sure. But more than that, he seemed… resigned. He had given up hope for me.

He was right, of course. I was all of those things. To that I was guilty on all counts, beyond a reasonable doubt. Though I still had no idea what I had done to provoke such a response from him, or why I had been on the floor, it could not have been good. I burned with shame, the same shame that I felt after every blackout. Defeated, I tilted the whiskey bottle far back and licked the insides, trying to savor every last drop. But it slipped from my hand and smacked me squarely in the face, delivering quite the shiner.

"Ow!" I screamed as my shame quickly boiled over into anger. There was so much to be angry about. I was angry that I got whacked in the face. I was angry that I was needlessly hungover, yet again. I was angry at my life situation. But most of all, I was angry that Kelly was right. I was a useless drunk. A pitiful excuse for a human being. I let loose another animalistic scream and threw the bottle across the room. "THIS WASN'T THE PLAN!" I screamed, the bottle shattering into a thousand pieces. My neighbors below, long accustomed to my sobs but not my shouts, knocked on their ceiling. I slammed my feet on the floor in response. "Oh, screw you!"

I rose from the couch, a bit too quickly. I wobbled a bit before catching myself on the edge of my coffee table. I walked carefully to the bathroom, gripping the wall and some furniture along the way, trying to do my best to avoid the broken glass around me as the room tilted back and forth.

It was the smell of my own urine that finally did me in. The stench of foul-smelling IPA hops leaving my body pushed my nausea over the edge. I knelt on the floor and braced myself against the porcelain toilet bowl in a ritual that I had performed many times

before, certain of what was to follow. The heaving came in strong, pulsating waves, my body convulsing as I lurched forward repeatedly over the toilet. Whatever it was that I had offered my withering body the night before was being vehemently rejected now. It was prolific. Tiny remnants of undigested food filled the bowl precipitously, the volume of vomit giving rise to back-splatter that stained my forehead and cheeks. Each break in the wave was like a tease before another spasm came on, stronger than the last. By the end, as I was dry heaving, I opened my teary eyes enough to see streaks of blood floating atop the yellow-brown liquid cesspool. They looked like eels in a dirty swamp.

When it was finally, mercifully finished, I grabbed the side of the toilet and forced myself to stand. I held the side of the wall until I caught my breath. I closed my eyes and flushed away my insides. When I opened my eyes, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

I don't want to be like this anymore. It was the quietness of the voice inside my head that drew my attention to this thought. It pierced through the chaos and throbbing with a resoluteness that I couldn't ignore. *Not like this.* Eyes bloodshot and stained with burst capillaries. A small piece of vomitus clinging to my lower lip. Splashes of urine and vomit over my chest and face. Not an ounce of dignity left. What had I become?

I peeled away from the mirror in disgust. I could no longer bear to see the man that looked back at me. In the final release of whatever I had left inside of me, I collapsed on the floor and cried. I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. I cried harder than I had ever cried in my life; maybe even harder than on the day of my wife's death. Every last fiber of my being escaped from me then, until I was completely drained. Entirely hollow. Vacant. Barren. In that moment, for the first time in as long as I could remember, I no longer felt the pain of years of shame and guilt. Instead, I felt a sense of relief wash over me, like a warm, soothing blanket. That was my rock bottom. I had had enough.

It's worth noting that the lotus flower emerges from mud.

In the rooms of AA, I've heard the full spectrum of stories from men and women at their lowest lows. Take Jerry, for instance. He shared with me that he once had a gun in his mouth while he sat inside of a bathroom stall, ready to pull the trigger. Someone knocked on the stall door, found him distraught, and got him help. The rest was history; he's been sober since. I've also heard the stories of other men, ones who had actually pulled the trigger. For some of them, the gun seemed to misfire for some reason. For others, they were permanently maimed, but realized they didn't want to die, and they managed to make it into the rooms of AA. So by comparison, I guess I had what you might call a "high bottom," if you believe in those sorts of things. I didn't have a suicide attempt to my name. I didn't spend time in prison. I was never in the "nut hut." But I did wave the white flag of surrender. I conceded.

I ended up isolating myself in my apartment for the better part of the next week or two, filled with shame and fear. The first few days were the worst, but even toward the end, I was shaking and sweating profusely, my heart racing uncontrollably. I knew I was withdrawing, and that it was dangerous to do so on my own—a quick trip to Dr. Google's office showed that alcohol withdrawal was not only agonizing, but potentially deadly. The body's nervous system, accustomed to the flood of neurotransmitters from chronic alcohol abuse, is suddenly thrown off balance. This is what resulted in my tremors and anxiety. On the milder end of the spectrum, my search showed, I could be expected to experience nausea and irritability. But if severe and left untreated, I might get seizures and even fatal hypertension. Despite absorbing all this information, I was too terrified to leave my apartment. I didn't know what might happen if I walked out the door, but I had a strong sense that I might drink. At that point in time, I didn't want a drink, but also didn't know how I could function without one. Ironically, the best thing for me at that moment was probably a drink of alcohol.

At one point—I can't be entirely sure, but it must have been in the earlier days of that week—I blacked out. When I came to, I found myself on the floor, uncertain as to what happened. My muscles were on fire, feeling as though they were being pulled apart inch by inch. My back screamed in agony. My head pulsed with the strength of a thousand drums. My stomach lurched and the room spun. My mouth was unbearably dry, my tongue cracked, and my lips crusted. It was a state that was far worse than the worst hangover I had ever had. It occurred to me that I may have had a seizure.

I wasn't sure where the scream came from at first. It was a long, visceral scream, a howl that seemed to be emerging from the depths of the soul. It startled me, until I realized that it was my own voice, foreign as it seemed. I screamed a few more times. It made me feel better. It vaporized some of my pain. Until I began hallucinating.

I was lying on the ground and staring at the exposed brick in my living room, eyes glazed over, when a thick cloud of mist and fog began to escape from the wall. From between the cracks in the brick, a dark shadowy figure began to take shape, initially just a large cloud, then slowly coalescing into a silhouette, its form gradually weaving together. The air grew colder as the object in front of me began to take shape. A loud hiss escaped from the wall as the final elements of murky smog clumped together. The bricks that birthed the figure seemed to groan and twist until finally the smoke settled. And just like that, I found myself looking at an elderly Indian woman wrapped in a long flowing white robe. She stumbled through the fog as though the momentum of being belched out of the wall had carried her too far. Her black-rimmed glasses nearly spilled off her nose. I stared up at her from the floor as she looked around, seeming to take in her surroundings. Her eyes locked with mine as she adjusted her glasses with her long, arthritic pointer finger.

Then, she laughed. Ordinarily, such a thing would have been welcome. It was a nice sounding laugh, all in all. It had a delightful, childlike quality to it, and she put her full belly into it. But it seemed to bounce off the walls and echo around the apartment, coming at me

from all directions. It rattled around in my hungover skull for almost a full minute. I covered my ears, but the laughter wouldn't stop. I was alarmed. It was as though her laughter was penetrating *into* me, the sound waves colliding with my viscera and burrowing into my bones. Convinced this was an awful hallucination, I took my hands from my ears and gave myself a nice hard slap. It partly worked, for her laughter stopped. But she was still there. And smiling at me, nonetheless. The elderly woman rose slowly into the air and began levitating. I was both horrified and amazed.

"Forgive me!" boomed a small but powerful voice. Her voice left a similar impression as her laughter, reverberating between my ears for a prolonged moment. "I was so delighted that I couldn't help but laugh. Oh, how I've missed this universe. I nearly forgot this phenomenon you call gravity!" She then giggled, causing me to cringe again. There was nothing for me to do but stare as this mysterious woman floated around my living room doing somersaults. Her gleeful routine went on for nearly an entire minute before she floated back down in front of me. As she touched down, a gnawing sense of recognition began to grow in the back of my mind. I knew her somehow. But how? My thoughts were so jumbled, my mind so scrambled at that point, that it was no use trying to place her. By the time I finally found my voice, I wasn't sure what to say. What I heard come from my mouth was, "Who *are* you?"

The woman took a seat on the floor, her legs crossed in lotus position. She moved gracefully and seemed quite nimble despite her age. I thought she must have been a hundred years old, and yet she sat with perfect posture, her back entirely straight. Then I realized that, while she seemed quite old, I couldn't place her age; she may have been a hundred, but could just have easily been in her sixties. Heck, maybe even her fifties.

She fixed her gaze on me. I squirmed, again feeling as though something were making its way through my head. I was quite sure that she was not just looking *at* me, but *through* me—examining my insides with scientific inquiry, dissecting this and that. I wondered for

a moment if this was what an alien abduction was like. I squeezed my eyes shut, again wishing away this hallucination, but when I opened them, there she was. Again, with a broad smile.

She cleared her throat and spoke. Only, this time she wasn't quite *speaking*. She was talking to me, but her lips were not moving. It occurred to me, then, that either I was witnessing one of the world's greatest acts of ventriloquy; or she was communicating in some other, supernatural fashion: telepathy. "In this realm, people call me Dipa Ma," she said.

I froze. It suddenly dawned on me why she seemed so familiar.

As a teenager, I had experimented with psychedelics on more than one occasion. You might say quite frequently, in fact. Usually, it was my old high school buddy Amit Patel who was by my side. Amit knew how to score all the good stuff, and he and I were good friends. Beyond our shared interest in drugs, we bonded over being the only two Indian kids in our high school class (the dot-head duo, they called us; or, if they were more creative, Apu's orphans). We did the obligatory first generation Indian things together: chess club, debate club, math league, national honor society, tennis. And a fair share of nonobligatory things as well, such as imbibing in dubious substances. We remained faithful friends after high school—Amit was the best man at my wedding, and he cared enough about me to check in on me regularly after my wife's death. Eventually, we grew apart—he outgrew the party scene, and I could never manage to leave it. Naturally, his phone calls and text messages gradually dwindled away.

But as high schoolers, we were thick as thieves. He and I would often sit fireside together and reminisce about philosophy, culture, religion, and any other topic that found itself enhanced by magical mushrooms. We fancied ourselves scientists, on the leading edge of experimentation with psychedelics and its ability to expand consciousness.

One night I had a psychedelic trip that was so vivid and remarkable that I would think about it for several years to come. Amit and I were sitting on lawn chairs in his backyard, the Beatles *Magical Mystery Tour* playing in the background, a generous firepit going strong and

keeping us warm that fall evening. By the time we had moved on from marijuana to mushrooms, it was close to midnight. I remember looking up at the stars on that clear and crisp night, enthralled at the sight of various constellations, when something strange began happening to Orion's belt. The three stars began to blink repeatedly and in synchrony. As they repeatedly flashed, they seemed to get brighter and brighter. All the while, the sky around us seemed to darken, other stars getting dimmer.

I looked over at Amit. His jaw had dropped open and there was an expression on his face that I could only explain as stupid. It was clear that he was seeing it too. That should've been my first clue that something was off.

Then the stars began to move, in unison. Slowly but surely, the two stars at the end of Orion's belt began to inch closer and closer together, until they met with the constellation's central star in a carefully orchestrated maneuver. Their convergence resulted in an intensely radiant light, so strong that both Amit and I had to shield our eyes.

"Is it aliens?!" he screamed. I was too terrified to answer. I just covered my eyes and wished for it to be over. But I sensed the light was getting stronger as it filtered around my arms. It was now accompanied by heat, the ground around us warming quickly.

There was a loud whistling sound from above us, followed by a thundering roar. I tucked my head between my legs and covered myself with my arms. Amit howled. I whimpered. We were both too scared to move.

Eventually, the light abated. The heat cooled. And in place of the thundering roar was a quiet, steady hiss. When we finally grew the courage to look up, we found ourselves staring at an elderly Indian woman with black-rimmed glasses, dressed in a long, flowing white robe.

We all stayed quiet for some time, Amit and I too shocked for words. She said nothing, her chin in the air thoughtfully, just staring back at us. At me, specifically. Then finally, this:

"You are not yet ready, I see. But you shall be soon. *Just do the next right thing*." Somehow, she delivered these three simple sentences

to us without moving her lips. And after that, in the matter of just a few seconds, she vanished before our very eyes. Dissolved. Gone. One second she was there, the next she was no longer.

In the many nights of drugging and partying that ensued, Amit and I went to great lengths to try to recreate this shared hallucination. We were desperate to meet this strange woman who had visited us from the cosmos. We tried to prime our emotions and senses. We stared deep into the night sky before ingesting the mushrooms, hoping to synchronize our consciousness. We researched Orion's belt. We even delved into Carl Jung's theory on the collective unconscious. The closest we ever came to recreating the moment was in imagining something similar—*Is that Santa riding a donkey?* But never could we manage to call on the woman from Orion's belt.

And yet fast-forward a couple of decades, and voilà! There she was, standing in my living room, this time having manifested from an exposed brick wall rather than a constellation of stars. "This is all a dream. A bad trip," I sputtered.

"You've been acting a fool," Dipa Ma said, admonishing me. She continued to communicate with me telepathically, her lips unmoving. "You've been clouding your mind for far too many years, lost in fear and overindulgence. But never mind that now," she said. I sensed her pity for me as I lay before her, cowering on the floor and trying to slither away. "Big things await you in this universe. It's time to get you straight. You have work to do. Much work." She leaned forward and touched me on the forehead with the palm of her hand. I felt a warm sensation radiate from my head through my entire body. My fingertips and toes pulsated with energy. My hair stood on end. Oddly, my heart beat seemed to slow, rather than race to keep pace with my fear. "May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you, and all beings, be free." Then, as she released her palm from my forehead, she said one last thing. Something that would come back to me many times in the months that followed. "*Just do the next right thing,*" she whispered.

Before I could think any further, I was met with a profound sense of unity with the universe. For a brief and fleeting moment, there

were no distinct boundaries between myself and my surrounding environment. Everything felt fluid. I was intimately connected to everything around me, such that no *one* thing was really a thing at all. Every *thing* was no *thing*, and yet everything was one thing.

This is nice, I thought, before blacking out again.