

TROPIC

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“I did not know the scope of my father’s failure. Nor did I know of his tremendous struggle to turn a history of destruction into a legacy of redemption— for himself

and so many

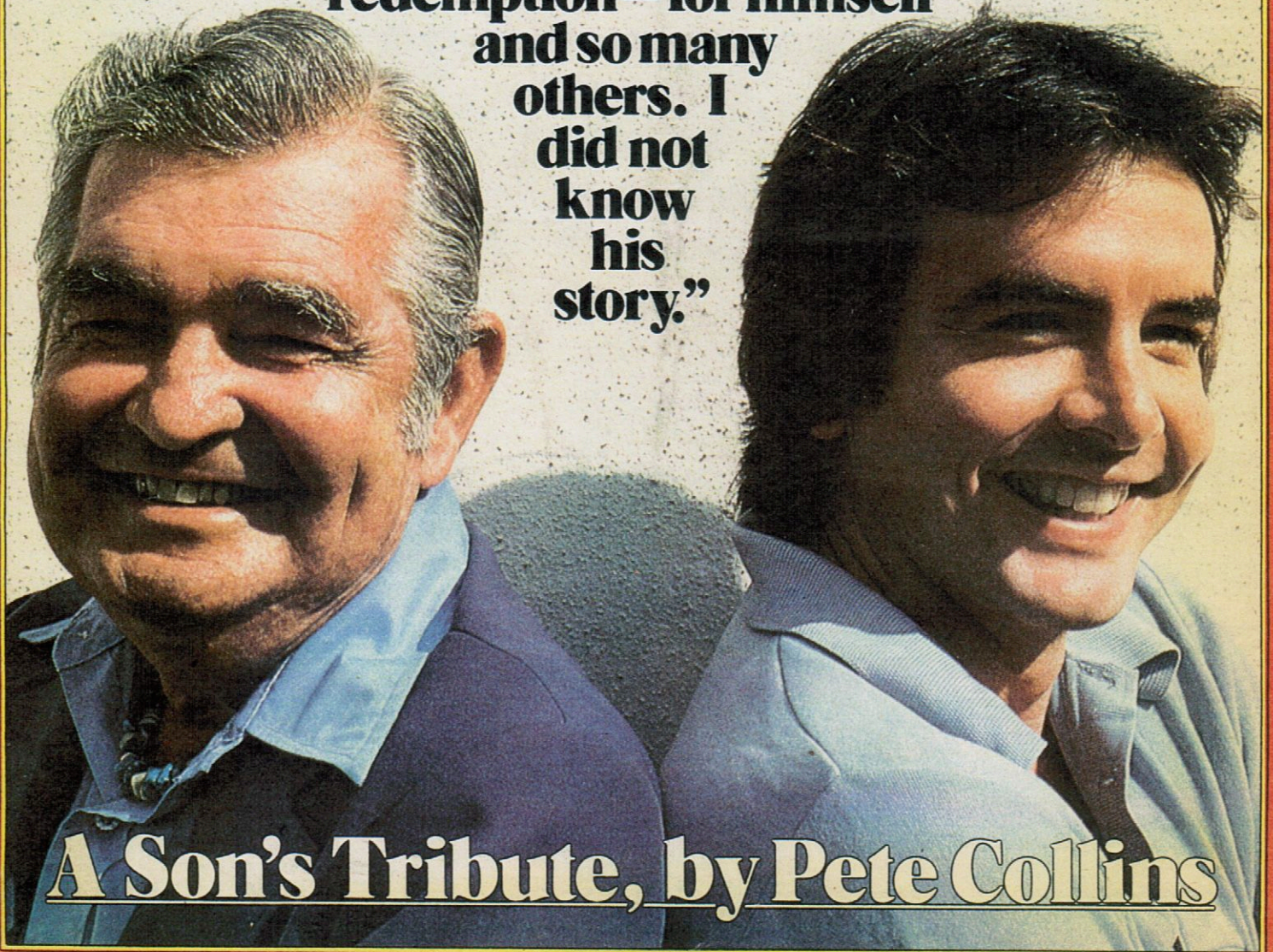
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A Son's Tribute, by Pete Collins

My Father's Story

He was a drunk's drunk. His future as an alcoholic looked secure. What happened?

Yeah Junction sticks out in my mind. There, burning oil scorched the air when our baby blue Corvair broke down on the way to Starke. Waiting for the tow truck, my mom looked forlorn. My sister shrieked at the sight of a snake patrolling the shoulder. And I bawled like a little kid, which I was. Finally near my father. Just up the road, just out of reach.

A prisoner at Raiford.

At the time I didn't believe this and you couldn't convince me of it had you tried. In my mind, we were driving north to a Marine camp to see a genuine Marine hero.

Then, and for some time afterward, the Marines were a big part of my life. I was a full-fledged Marineophile. Marine magazines, Marine cuff links, Marine Tales of the Supernatural, Marine recipes, a Marine ashtray. I even ate every meal off a white china plate with the Marine insignia emblazoned in its center. And what was I, four? Five?

I didn't manufacture this Marine stuff out of thin air or comic books. Rather, it was something my mom resorted to after persistent questions about my father's absence. Perhaps it was easier to explain it that way than to engrave the intimacies of Dad's descent into hell onto my fertile imagination. She was dead right. God only knows what I would have collected if I knew my dad was a prisoner.

Surely you can imagine my chagrin when on a visiting day, a fat older boy asked me why the hell I was talking about "the Marines this" and "the Marines that" when clearly this was a prison. The grownups weren't Marines. They were convicts. I dealt with this blasphemy, this liar, with force. I dug my kneecaps into his biceps. I wanted to spit on him. I believe I wanted to kill him.

My first visual memory of my father is within the confines of Raiford. It all retains a dreamlike quality. Bits and pieces. My dad in uniform. I hardly remember a damn thing. I did not know the scope of the failure my father achieved: the explosion of our nuclear family; his physical deterioration; financial ruin, and worst of all, the failure he saw in his own eyes. His world, his reputation, his life, flotsam in a sea that he poured down his throat. A tide of alcohol. And I did not know then his tremen-



On opposite page, Jack Collins today, at 58. Above, with his infant son, Pete, before Jack went to Raiford.

dous struggle to turn a history of destruction into a legacy of redemption for himself, and for so many others.

I did not know his story.

At the old railroad station, in languorous Lawley, Ala., 30 miles south of Tuscaloosa, Jack Collins could look up at the pine-board walls and understand the meaning of cause and effect.

There were only two symbols: a written admonishment and a photograph. A hand-lettered sign read "Look Out At Railroad Crossings." But it was the photograph that was of real interest to the boy.

Its grisly contents were graphic. The picture showed the remains of a Model T Ford that happened upon the track at the precise moment a train came plowing through town. The driver, Tom — the boy's father — flew out

By PETE COLLINS

of the car with the seat in hot pursuit and touched down on the other side of a nearby fence. Dead and screamless in midair. Two others lay mangled, dead, inside the car. The conductor said he repeatedly blew his whistle as he approached the crossing and saw the car on a path bound to intersect with his. Nobody doubted his word. Everyone knew the men in the car had been drinking.

The ghastly photograph was Jack's only real memory of his father, who was killed when the boy was 2. The moral of the story seemed to be: the wages of inattentiveness — no, the wages of drunkenness — are death. Along his way the message was lost on the boy. And it was no surprise.

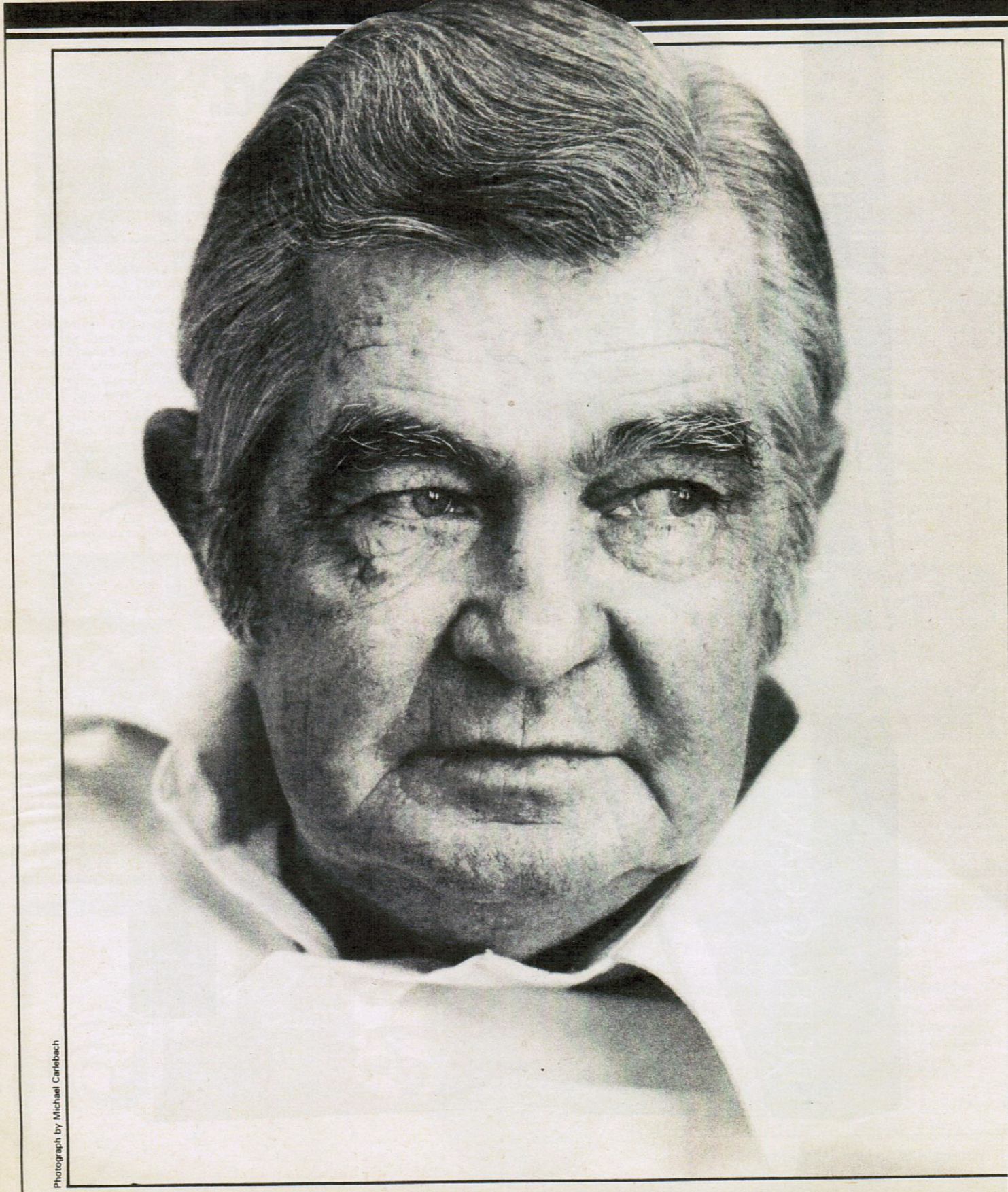
For if Tom Collins was a drunk wasn't he following in his father's footsteps? Jack only heard about his grandfather's death too: "They said it had to do with alcohol. He downed too many batches of moonshine with too many handfuls of oak ashes thrown in to make the whisky ferment faster. In effect he drank from jugs containing a lethal dose of lye in the alcohol. They said it ate holes in his intestines. Blood leaked through the holes and he died."

So it seemed only natural then that when he was 7 years old and barefoot, Jack Collins, his brother Tom, and his cousins Hilbert and Shirley, took a gallon of moonshine and headed to the woods to nip it.

My dad still remembers his first drink. "It tasted warm and it burned like hell on the way down. When it hit my stomach, I felt it and my eyes watered. It had a kick." As a theorem: Alcohol is to moonshine as gasoline is to rocket fuel.

At 8, he had his first blackout. When enough alcohol is consumed to short-circuit the memory centers of the brain, a person cannot remember events that occurred while they were under the influence. Most drinkers go through a lifetime without this ever happening.

My dad's childhood didn't last long. His mother soon remarried and squandered much of the insurance money on the new husband, who was, according to relatives I've talked to, as fanatically religious as he was disturbed mentally. He combined the two into a philosophy that allowed him with a clear conscience to deal with his aversion to the two boys: Spare



Photograph by Michael Corlebach



Sgt. and Mrs. Jack Collins, newly married.

the rod and the beating arm withers.

Eventually, my dad and Tom were farmed out to relatives. It was, they knew, for their own good. They got the do-si-do treatment, sent to a succession of aunts and uncles.

The families tended to be kind; my father almost always had a roof over his head, food of some kind and occasionally shoes on his feet. But the array of surrogate parents left him numbed.

Before my dad left Lawley at the age of 14 to find his life, he earned a nickname of sort: That Boy. As in, "That Boy and his friends put my wagon and furniture on top of my roof again, sheriff, while I was at the movie house. Now what're you gonna do about it?" Just young and restless and bored.

He felt as if he were "always standing within a third circle." Apart. Alienated. Which in its simplicity, its paucity of words, convinces me that there is something of the poet in him. He would

stand in this "third circle" again. Maybe he always did.

On his own, he moved to Selma, escaping Lawley. He landed a job with Standard Oil, driving a truck.

He began to get into some trouble, and became known to the police mostly through "weekend scrapes," and was drinking "all I could get." The cops suggested that a natural outlet for his exuberance might be the armed forces. I suppose they just wanted him out of the way. For whatever reason, he agreed.

At boot camp on Parris Island his talent with a gun, a carry-over from his hunting days in Lawley's woods, was documented. With a rifle or machine gun, he achieved an expert rating.

Much more important was the camaraderie of his fellow drinkers and the proximity and price of alcohol on the base. "When we got our checks we

counted the money according to how much booze we could buy. Say if I had \$2.40, I'd count it as 24 beers."

He looked good in dress blues. He looked like an American should look; not quite prettily handsome in the fashion of Gary Cooper, but a roughened version of Clark Gable. If you took a charcoal sketch of Gable and smudged some of the features you'd almost have the look. Blue eyes, wavy black hair, large ears, with an engaging grin flanked by long, deep dimples. He was tall (6 feet 1 inch) and trim (150 lbs.).

The ideal Marine made a tour of the East Coast in a recruitment program. At movie theaters, he performed a rifle routine, accompanied by the bugle corps, before showings of *The Shores of Tripoli*. Of those performances, he says, "I was drunk every time."

When war became imminent, he was sent to Camp LeJeune, N.C., for train-

ing. After a month in New Zealand for briefing, and a journey on the SS American Legion, the Pacific Fleet landed on Japanese Imperial Army territory — Guadalcanal — and met moderate resistance.

By now, my dad was an alcoholic platoon sergeant in charge of 50 men. His main worry, he said, was not the potentially dangerous storming of Red Beach, but where he would get his next drink.

On the second day, the Marines overran the landing strip and captured Japanese supply houses. "We were like kids, going through the buildings, wondering what we'd captured. Mostly general supplies and rice. Some of the rice was still warm, in pots. We really surprised them. Then a warehouse full of saki.

"After we thought the area secure, we opened up cases of saki and sat around getting drunk. All of a sudden the Japs counterattacked and opened fire. A guy I went to boot camp with got killed instantly. We were all scrambling around for our guns. I didn't think I was going to be able to find mine."

Within a week something happened that sharpened my dad's perception of war. Japanese soldiers staggered into camp and told of troops forced inland at the start of the battle who were scared needed food and medical provisions and wanted nothing more than to surrender. The soldiers did a good acting job. Marines, doctors and interpreters set out across the Mecatanal River to investigate. And the ambush began. Of 60 men who went, two survived.

Selected for the investigation team my dad went to the ambush scene. "I was awful. Some of the bodies were hung from trees. Some with their arms and legs cut off. Some missing their heads. The Marines left on the beach had been mutilated with bayonets... There was no way you could have even been prepared for that sight."

For the next four months the Marine fought the heat, jungle, snipers, repelled banzai charges and scattered the Japanese into small harmless clusters. They took no prisoners.

When my father ran out of saki (he buried some of the original cache on the beach for "future reference") he relied on a concoction called jungle juice: canned fruit, sugar and the heat. Eventually, when the Army arrived, he swapped swords and souvenirs for pure alcohol. "It came in 5-gallon cans that the medics used. Sometimes we drank straight. Sometimes we'd cut it with grapefruit juice."

In all, the First Division was in combat for 27 months. It was feared that Marines, after this gruesome campaign were too barbaric to return to the civilian community in the United States.

For my dad, and a lot of other people alcohol became the coping mechanism. And, in Australia, he was hospitalized for alcoholism. Sweating, and with shakes, he had reported to the medical officer thinking it was another bout with malaria. They told him it was alcohol withdrawal. After hospitalization, felt wonderful. "I thought, well, if I'm alcoholic, I guess that means I'm supposed to drink. So I did."

Finally, he was sent back to Diego, sweating out his 21st bout v

malaria since he left for the war.

At the beginning of a 30-day furlough, he and his "co-heroes" took a cross-country train ride to Birmingham, Ala. "I don't remember the trip at all. All that's clear now is that the room was full of whisky bottles. If we noticed we were running low we'd call the porter and tell him to wire ahead to the next stop for fresh bottles." The 30 days stretched into 60. Visiting and drinking and laughing to do. Parades and interviews and newspaper clippings. Things stretched into a blur. All for killing Japs.

In 1946 he was court-martialed at Camp LeJeune, charged with unauthorized use of a government vehicle. While on a binge, he and some buddies hopped in a jeep and drove into town. The driver said my dad ordered him to chauffeur. After 37 days in the brig, he was acquitted at the trial though he said, "That sounds about like something I'd do." A year later, Gunnery Sergeant Collins left the Marines with an honorable discharge, and he began to pursue the course in civilian life that would land him in Raiford.

In the beginning of his Miami days, which lasted about a decade, the last of the reasonably good times occurred. He had a wife, a pretty baby girl, a nice place to live and a good job as service manager of a tire company. He was a functioning alcoholic. He drank and drank. He knew all the bartenders and left big tips. He bought rounds for the crowd long past the time when some drinkers started to decline politely. He knew how to handle a funny story and never got morose. He could drink with the best of them. And hold it. Like a man. He was a drunk's drunk. His future as an alcoholic looked secure.

I'll say this: An alcoholic with looks, charm and wit is among the world's

most devious creatures. He can contrive, convince, charm a drink from anyone. He can borrow money to get booze. At first. But there is always a pay-up. First the debt, then the vigorish.

There are any number of times my dad's drinking could have led to his death or somebody else's. I'm talking about violent death now. Perhaps there's something to the cliché that God protects drunks and little children, for alcoholism as a way of life is profoundly dangerous.

Consider this: With a fairly new pickup truck and a just-bought bottle of vodka, my dad was heading east on 95th Street heading home. He blacked out and veered into a light pole and started to skid across two lanes of traffic. "I could see through part of the windshield that I was heading for the tree, a huge banyan tree I'd seen plenty of times before. First I saw the branches, then the limbs, and I thought, 'Jesus, that sonofabitch had better move before I get there or I'm dead.' Well it didn't. Upon impact, I got thrown to the floor and got beat nearly to death by the empty bottles flying out from under the seat and into the cab. In fact I think one of the bottles knocked me unconscious. Somehow I managed to throw the full bottle out of the truck before I passed out."

North Shore Hospital was just a block away and he woke in the emergency room a little groggy from a concussion. However, the lights were very dim and flickering because they were powered by a standby generator. "I started complaining. I was raising hell because of the lights. I told them that this was sure as shit a second-class hospital. At first they apologized — something had knocked out the electricity. But then, when a policeman informed them that I had done it by shearing the light pole, they seemed more abrupt. I left the hospital that night and got a look at the

truck on the way out. I never saw such a wreck in all my life. The dashboard was completely buckled and the whole truck — engine, body — was ruined. I said to myself I was damn lucky. I've got to give this shit up."

He was charged with failure to keep his vehicle under control. The next morning, he remembered something about a bottle. He got a friend to drive him over and found the bottle not far from the truck. Still unopened. But not for long.

My dad's disintegration moved forward. He became unreliable in every phase of his life. His job suffered, his family life too. His concerns with everyday life grew minute.

He became a slave to alcohol. A killing mistress. He was powerless before it. He lived bottle to mouth. It kept him going and it's all he cared about. He drank at country clubs and at sleazy beer and wine joints. He drank with friends and he drank alone.

It's not that those who loved him didn't utter pleas and offer prayers. It's not that even he didn't realize something was going awry. (He even lost his monkey, Herbert, his sidekick, over a fallout concerning his drinking. Herbert would not tolerate it.) It's just that my dad fell into the seductive rhythm, the momentum of alcoholism.

And he fulfilled all the expectations, touched all the bases along the way into the final stages of this progressive disease.

Toward the end, my dad, like all chronic alcoholics, turned into a lonely man whose only compulsion or need was to drink. Whose only fear was D.T.'s.

He was deep into the mess his life had become. He was descending the scale of dignity through which the alcoholic is systematically reduced. You can

hang your head only so low but you can't drink shame. How about a bottle of vodka? If you can't beg or borrow — steal.

"The face of evil is always the face of total need," wrote William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch*. "Beyond a certain frequency, need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: 'Wouldn't you?' Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need. Because you would be in a state of total sickness, total possession, and not in a position to act any other way. A rabid dog cannot choose but to bite."

He spent the last year and a half before his arrest — the time around my birth — drinking. His troubles with the law began slightly before this with: D.U.I. charges, public intoxication, assault and battery from an occasional fight, as well as his short hobby of "paperhanging" — signing worthless checks. If this continued and he had not been sent to prison, he'd be dead.

He speaks with an objectivity of this period. "I lived in a state of total addiction: mental, physical, spiritual — completely. I felt total confusion, pain, misery, remorse and guilt. I kept constantly asking why I did it to myself and others, and looking for a drink at the same time. I lived a solitary existence. The only souls I knew were people as lost as I was.

"Sometimes I'd be lying in a bed early in the morning and I'd see the first layers of light hitting the clouds and I'd be trembling already and I'd be saying, 'Oh God don't let this be happening again.' But I knew that unless I got locked up, the cycle would be the same. At the instant of awakening I'd be feeling revulsion about my life."

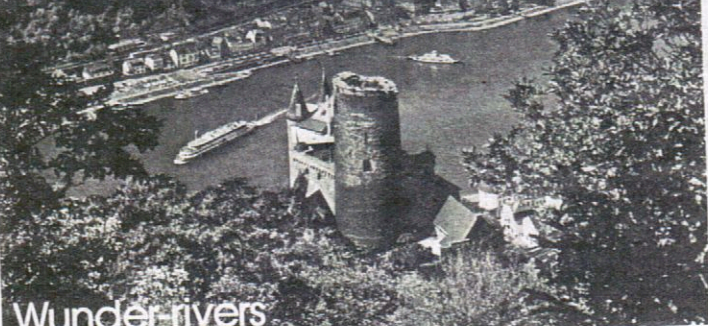
And this: "I thought you had to start vomiting in the morning before you



A photo from the early '60s, showing Jack Collins presiding at the Miami Alcoholic Rehabilitation Program.

Photograph by Michael Carabach

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My Father's Story

started breathing."

"I had tried AA and 'proved' to myself that I didn't need alcohol. That I could control my drinking. Almost a year. When I went back, it was worse than ever. I'd sit there drinking again, wondering if there was really a higher power why he would let one of his creatures live in this condition. In fact I wondered why I was living at all."

My father met Whitey the Finn in jail. They were both in on a drunk charge. And they became partners in crime. He and Whitey had much in common. Both beyond the pale. They couldn't beg or borrow. There was only one thing left. What they were about to discover, to no one's surprise, is that they could not steal either.

They took a bus to their target, a liquor warehouse in Orlando, because neither of them had a car after accidents, court orders, repossessions, etc.

For a couple of days they watched the comings and goings at the warehouse, and looked for a car they could abscond with if the robbery succeeded. They noticed a Cadillac parked on the curb with the windows down and the key in the ignition. So far so good. The rest of the time, they sat around in a cheap hotel room and drank and planned the robbery. Whitey would confront the cashier pretending to have a gun in his coat. My dad would serve as both lookout and car thief. They dreamed what they would do with the money.

My dad said, "Hell, I didn't like being a bad guy around Miami, owing everybody. Having deceived people like that. I actually thought that if I pulled this off I could pay everybody off and maybe straighten out somewhere along the way. What probably would have happened is that I'd have paid everybody off and then, for a short time, become a flamboyant drunk, and then wound up in the same shape. Probably worse. My real problem was alcoholism, not the financial problems that stemmed from it."

The heist happened in broad daylight.

They saw the car they wanted. Whitey walked into the sales office. My dad stood watch outside.

Suddenly, Whitey barreled down the sidewalk with a bagful of money. Whitey's acting job succeeded. The cashier was sufficiently frightened; she threw \$14,000 his way in a matter of seconds.

It went too smoothly, too quickly. When Whitey started screaming for my dad to start stepping on the gas, my dad was standing on the sidewalk. People were chasing Whitey and yelling at him. They both sprinted to the Cadillac and found it locked. Now a mad scramble ensued with them desperately shouting at each other. A helluva time to be looking for a getaway car.

Finally my dad noticed an unlocked

Chevy with the starter switch on the steering column. It didn't need a key. He jumped in, and opened the door for Whitey.

Through all the bungling, the first cop they saw was 20 miles outside of Orlando, and he was a school crossing guard.

"That afternoon we were parked outside of Graham Dairy, getting some gas, ready to head into Miami. We'd had no trouble. But just as we got on the road again, a highway patrolman pulled Whitey over for a routine license check. He didn't know anything about the car or the robbery. The luck of the Irish. But he did know about the booze on Whitey's breath and the suspended license Whitey showed him. Whitey said 'How much would this cost me in a court?' and the officer said, 'About \$250 and they'll revoke your driving privileges. So Whitey pulls a wad of money out of his trousers and hands it to the officer. Now this cop looks at us, the way we're dressed, the way we look — I'd been drinking for a year straight — and asks Whitey if he happens to have any more money. 'Oh, sure officer, I got plenty more,' he says, you know those Finns are worse than Polacks, and reaches in another pocket and pulls out thousands. Needless to say I'm dying in the passenger seat. We're ordered out of the car. I reached in the glove compartment and took a long drink of vodka. I got out, walked back to the rear and then thought, 'Hell, it'd be my last, I might as well have or more.' I turned around and headed back to the passenger side and opened the glove compartment without saying a word. I'm surprised the cop didn't think I was going for a gun and shoot me. I think I was hoping he would."

"I just tilted the bottle up and swallowed a few times, then tossed it back onto the seat. I knew it'd be the last I ever have."

And now it's been 23 years.

The next morning, in a police car on the way to Orlando, hands and feet were chained to the back seat, he got a D.T.'s.

Some members of my family heard about the arrest after people called. My dad made the news.

He waited three months in jail in Orlando to stand trial, and was found guilty of unarmed robbery. The sentence in prison: There were also alcohol-related charges in Miami that added four years. When asked if there was anything he wanted to say, he told the judge that he thought all his problems stemmed from chronic alcoholism. The judge looked at his sheet, said, 'Yes, you do seem to have some drinking problems.' Bing Bang Boom: Bailiff, in case. My dad headed to Starke, home of Raiford, with a sentence not to more than 130 years.

I was 2, my sister, 10. My dad sent away for the remainder of his life for the essential protection of the good people of Florida. My father went to work, and set about the task her everlasting credit, of raising my mother and I. She was pretty much alone her belief that my dad would make through prison all right.

After the Orlando caper with Whitey the Finn, most of my dad's fri

wrote him off. Surely any inherent goodness in my father would be crushed in prison. Many people just nodded sagely. My dad had fulfilled their expectations.

My mom simply felt that God would not have spared my dad's life as a daredevil young boy, as a Marine in the vicious fighting, and as an alcoholic plowing into immovable objects just to have him turn into a cell-dweller at Raiford. She thought there had to be something more to his life.

My sister, Carol, undoubtedly had it much worse than me. After all, she was entering her teens, cruel years, when you can be ostracized for wearing the wrong brand of shoes. It is no help that your father is behind bars: three hots and a cot, for life.

As for me, I didn't know what the hell was going on. I ate, I slept, I got drop-

Pete Collins: "My mom simply felt that God would not have spared my dad's life as a daredevil young boy, as a Marine in the vicious fighting, and as an alcoholic plowing into immovable objects, just to have him turn into a cell-dweller at Raiford. She thought there had to be something more to his life."

ped off at nursery school while my mom went to work. I didn't know anything else to compare this existence to, until I began watching television. Where was my Ozzie? If father knows best, where is he? I've got some questions. Who's playing Ward Cleaver to my Beaver? Oh! he's in the Marines. THE MARINES! Can we go visit him? OK. Wow. And my imagination went to work. I created a father.

By the time my dad got out of New-
cocks, the classification and processing center in Raiford, he'd been sober for seven months.

He was assigned a cell in The Rock (the main housing unit). Of his first day, he says, "That's when everybody thinks about committing suicide; but there's not enough privacy in Raiford."

He found a job using his battlefield

experience as a medic's aide, in the medical facility. The head of the unit, prison employe Joe Hitchcock, told him of the pressures of working around all the drugs, knowing that my dad possessed an addictive personality. My father told him, "I intend to behave myself wherever I am." And meant it.

He started out in the Snake Pit, the drug ward. Mostly, he worked with junkies, providing maintenance-level doses of Thorazine or Dilaudid. Eventually he handled emergency cases: beatings, stabbings, burnings, rapes, work accidents. "When I woke up in the morning there, my total energy was spent in trying to survive the day. Figuring out a way to stay alive. So many nuts. So many people that would cut your throat for the hell of it, stab you in the back, whatever."

There was also the brutality of the state. From time to time, my dad would look in the hallway and see one or two stretchers with dead people on them. They were branded across the forehead with a band of second degree burns, the new electronic crown of thorns — the electric chair. One day there were four such stretchers. "We'd watch the officials walking out of the Death Chamber like they were making their way back from a picnic. They'd be gabbing about sports or swapping jokes."

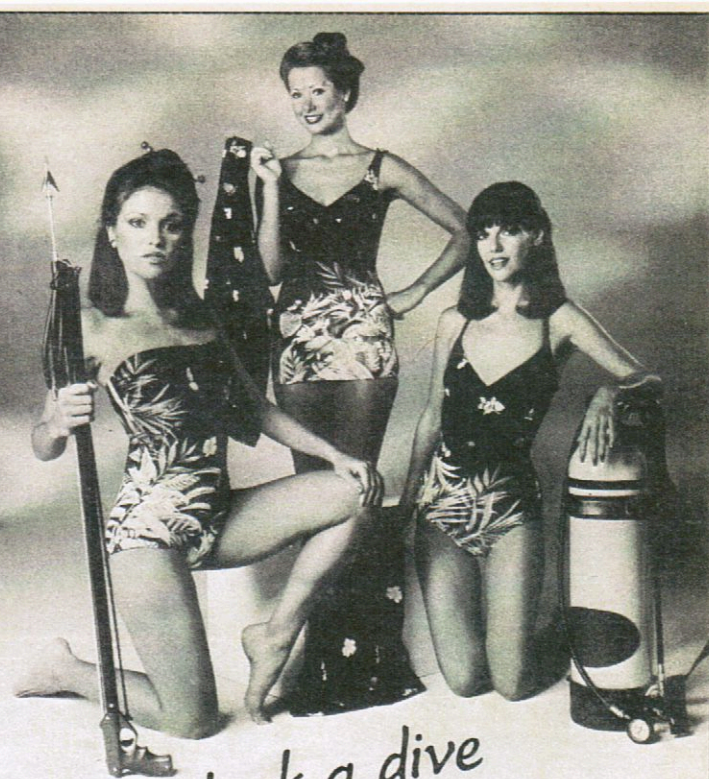
The most important thing my dad achieved in Raiford, besides his own continuing sobriety, was the resumption of the prison AA program which was on its way to extinction. Out of over 3,000 inmates, there were nine active members. The problem was an uncaring sponsor, uninterested in the welfare of alcoholics.

So my dad and another inmate tried something that took undeniable courage; six months in prison on a lifetime card is not a time to be flexing your muscles against a prison official. They petitioned to have a meeting during which they would bring up the sponsor's shortcomings. They wanted Hitchcock to be the sponsor, and had no idea what repercussions might occur. Eventually, the warden appointed Hitchcock.

The AA group turned around. Within three months it had 150 active members.

They believed in the program and wouldn't let anything screw it up. They screened their ranks for troublemakers, anybody who could endanger their work. "It was so vital to me because of something I'd realized: that I never had to take another drink as long as I lived; that I was getting along fine, more than fine, without it. Even if I rotted in my cell from old age. My physical freedom didn't mean nearly as much as my mental and emotional freedom. I felt I had already been imprisoned by the bottle all my life. There's either an old country song or just an old corny saying that goes, 'I found life doing life.' But I did know that if I could ever be free again, I could have a different life."

He came a step closer at the end of 1959 when he applied for a transfer to the Avon Park Correctional Institution, a minimum security facility. They happened to need somebody to work in the medical department in outpatient and emergency care. My dad got security clearance and the recommendation of the doctors at Raiford. As the '60s



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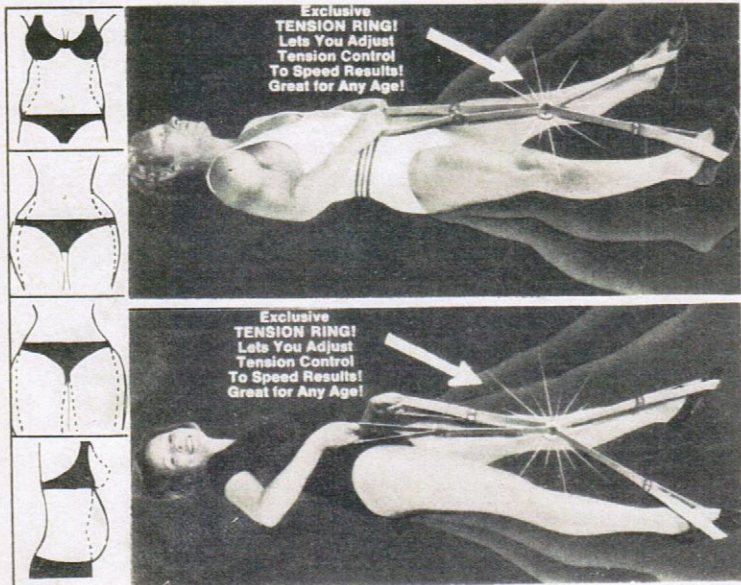
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My Father's Story

began, he got the OK.

In slightly less than one year, my dad became the first inmate ever released from the Florida prison system to attend an AA convention. In Clearwater, he spoke to 700 people on the role that AA played in both the prison system and in his life. An experiment. History, of sorts, was being made. Now as many as 30 or 40 inmates attend every year.

For three days he was free. Technically he was still serving life. But here he was in Clearwater with money in his pocket and a suit, shirt and tie that his classification officer, Bill Booth, had loaned him. After years of wearing state-issue clothing. From a cell to the streets. To buy a hamburger, to see a movie. To sleep on a bed instead of a cot. He said it felt great. What kept him from spinning on his heels and taking a walk? Taking a drink? "It crossed my mind. But you have to think about something like that. I had a lot riding on me and I couldn't let those people down. Besides, in a situation like mine, there's no escape. I'd been running all my damn life from something and I was tired of looking over my shoulder."

After the weekend he returned to Avon Park, not just another inmate. By the end of 1961, he was granted a parole, released into the custody of a Miami man whom my dad had set up in business when he was still in a position to help somebody.

My dad was coming home.

Who among us has not felt the implosion of childhood dreams? In my instance, the act occurred one night. In one sitting. Although my dad had tried to talk to me about the subject of alcoholism before, it had never been as graphic.

At an AA meeting, my dad gave an effective, humorous and strong speech about the events that led him to the podium. True to life in these confessions, he described the low points of his life.

I was 7 or 8 and in the crowd and heard it. And for the first time began to understand the story that you've been reading. I knew all at once whose son I was. I mulled this new father over and during an awkward silence on the ride home I told him that I was still proud of him. Proudly.

Occasionally, I've been asked if I feel any resentment concerning the whole affair. If I felt deceived. Well, if I did, I know the smoke screen, presented without malice, acted as a balm to soothe my inquisitive mind. Until the harsher realities could be processed. And there is no resentment. There never was.

Another thing. Do you know what it is like for a boy of 7 who has only seen his father twice in five years to finally be with his dad? I was so damn happy to have him around, that where he had been or what he was doing ultimately didn't matter.

This acceptance was certainly ushered

along by my mom's positive attitude. She had perpetuated an image of him as a good man. She always wanted us to think the very best.

My dad and I started doing things together, and it is Saturdays that I remember most; at Joe's Clip Joint ("We stand behind our haircuts"). Here I sat among men with my father and saw the mounted goose with its football helmet on, the fishing tackle, the pictures of naked girls in the magazines; smelled the lathered faces, the aftershave, the bay rum, the hair tonic; heard the whir of electric razors, and the snipping of scissors. But most of all I heard the conversation. The talks about hangovers, point spreads, dirty jokes, famous fights, boxers, football players, baseball players, the track, the behavior of

Jack Collins: "I knew a hell of a lot of people who might wind up like I did if the problem continued to be ignored. In the courts, nothing was being given out but jail sentences. I wanted to help. I don't think anybody ever makes up for the damage they've caused, but if you make a recovery from alcoholism and you're worth anything, you try."

women the previous evening, fishin' tales, hunting trips, and what a pain the ass your lawn and wife can become. It felt great to be a part of this.

After the haircuts, we'd round t' corner to Royal Castle and a lunch of hamburgers, fries and a birch beer f' me. Inevitably we'd pop into a halfw' house for a while and I'd be introduc' to the other alcoholics as my dad "sponsor." I could tell that these peop' considered my father important som' how because of his new job, but I did understand it yet.

In the afternoon, we might do sor' fishing or we might play catch with football in the backyard as my d' stressed the importance of the "over t' shoulder" catch, and talked about k' endary receivers. (During this perio' played football at the Community Ce' ter and on game day he faithfu

showed up to watch me sit on the bench.) To me it didn't matter what we were doing. The important thing was that it was us.

Needless to say, I wasn't the only thing going on in my dad's life. After all, before his arrest he'd managed to obliterate every sector of his life. Now he had to rebuild. "I knew I could handle it, if I only didn't drink. I felt a degree of comfort knowing that if I stayed sober I could cope."

Briefly he worked as a salesman with a battery company (an old friend who trusted him gave him a job) and became a member of AA groups in Miami Shores and North Dade. Still, he and others felt frustrated. "I knew a hell of a lot of people who might wind up like I did if the problem continued to be ignored. In the courts, nothing was being given out but jail sentences. I wanted to help. I don't think anybody ever makes up for the damage they've caused, but if you make a recovery from alcoholism and you're worth anything, you try."

At the same time, Circuit Court Judge Milton Friedman examined the futile, expensive dilemma posed by the drunks flowing through the court system. "We had over 10,000 cases a year involving individuals charged with intoxication. From my viewpoint, it looked like a revolving door. I would have the same people in front of me five, six, seven times a year. If guilty — and they were — I'd sentence them to 30 days in jail. I'd heard stories that before I sat on the bench, they developed a simple method of rehabilitating Miami's drunks: the police would pile them in a van, drive across the Broward line and dump them out."

A pilot program was started with attempts to contact those sentenced into the stockade. A man named Phil Haswell, who gave me the Marine plate, was the inaugural head of the program. Jack Collins was among those who spoke at the Stockade. Haswell, suffering from ill health, retired after a few months. Friedman looked for a new director and an expanded program.

Judge Friedman: "Since this program was unprecedented, I didn't know where to turn or how to get started. There were no guidelines. I wanted to use a recovering alcoholic, someone who'd been through it themselves. Jack's record almost scared me off in the beginning but then attracted me. He had all the credentials. I talked to him about the responsibility entailed in this program, in that it affected thousands of lives. I told him that if he went sour on me, I was in trouble. I decided to take the gamble. My association with Jack and the success of the program has been one of the bright spots in my life."

First of its kind in the country, the effort intrigued Health, Education and Welfare and when 44 judges from throughout the nation met in Washington, D.C., at an alcoholism conference, the Miami program became the focus. The City of Miami Alcoholism Rehabilitation Program has won awards for many years from the National Association of Judges.

Star drunks, as my dad terms them, benefited from the "C-4 Program" at the stockade, C building, Fourth Level. An intensive 30-day rehabilitation attempt. Daily group meetings, films, lec-

turers from the alcoholic community. With my dad as director and with the aid of one assistant and a total annual budget of \$10,000, nearly 17,500 cases were processed.

People who wanted to try to quit were being helped for the first time. It was helping my dad, too. He's told me any number of times that once free from

Raiford and Avon Park he would've been unfulfilled without the opportunity to work with alcoholics.

It helped in other ways. About this time, former Gov. Claude Kirk granted him a full pardon.

In the mornings my father joined Judge Friedman in assigning the staggering number of those arrested on

drunk charges to either a suspended sentence, time served, a 30-day term in the stockade or C-4. Friedman again: "I knew I could rely on Jack's knowledge. He was the expert. He made a better man and judge of me. I have more compassion now, realizing that alcoholics are sick people that need help. The

Continued on page 28

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My Father's Story

Continued from page 19

question became: If this was my brother before me, would I want to see him in a hospital or gutter? My life became intertwined with Jack's and AA. He got me speaking with him at the Police Academy, with civic groups and once we went to Freeport to

meet with the Chief Justice of the Bahamas, who wanted to make a constitutional change. Up till then they'd been treating the alcoholics like the criminally insane.

"What was remarkable to me is that day by day Jack was constantly dealing with what many

would term the dregs of society. That takes a man that's extremely strong-willed and very conscientious."

Sometimes my dad would take me around with him during a workday and I can verify that few of the individuals he worked with were clean-jawed, bright-

eyed specimens who happened to get arrested on a rare night on the town. Most of them didn't know the meaning of the word hygiene and wouldn't have done anything about it if they did. Many hadn't bathed in weeks or months and generally slept in weeds, on benches or, once in a while, in the luxury of a flophouse. Many had slurred speech, brain damage, and at times simply didn't bother to maneuver their pants in any fashion before unloading their bowels or bladders.

Jack Collins said, "You had to look past all that at the person and realize they didn't want to be that way. They hadn't been born in this condition. They were somebody's brother, mother, son, husband, whatever. At one point in their lives they'd been loved and they might have really been something. But they'd been chronic alcoholics so long they had embraced it as a lifestyle.

"These so-called human junkheaps were a good deterrent for me, a mirror, so to speak. I looked at them and knew without a doubt that would be me if I ever went back to drinking. How far away was I when I got arrested? At times, the seeming hopelessness I was constantly confronted with got to me. The success seemed so small. But when you noticed just one or two that really looked like they would make it, it was worth while."

Gradually the program took on halfway houses for the more promising of the C-4 graduates. This kept them from returning to their old haunts and gave them odd jobs. Four houses with federal and local funding. Late came vocational guidance.

Early on, I realized I'd be sharing my father with his passion, bringing alcoholism, furtiveness and huddled in its corner, into the glare of society's bright beam. I believe this obsession could kill him. He says, "I'll continue to do it as long as I continue to be effective and the stop." But then, "I'm good; what I do. I enjoy it. And I grow wiser as time goes on."

It's this wisdom that people seek at all hours as they search for deliverance. Countless times I've answered the phone in the middle of the night and heard the lonely, urgent, anguish voices, sometimes sobbing, retching, slurred or wailing; crying out to talk to "Jack." Hoping for help. And he listens for ten thousandth time to the confessions of woe: the drinking binge, the lost job, the slapping around of the wife and kid, the bloody accident and then with generally unerring instinct I heard him reply like a Marine drill sergeant or with the compassion of a mother clutching sweetest child and telling

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Several years later, C-4 was taken over by Metropolitan Dade County. And my dad, who built it up from infancy with his hands, heart and guts, was made the number-two man. "I didn't give a shit about that as long as it was working."

Three years later, he resigned. They said come back anytime you want. He says he left it at its peak. Those who know him said that the paperwork was getting more treatment than the people and that he couldn't stomach that.

But he could move to a new program, "to do the one thing I always wanted to do: participate in a follow-up program for recovering alcoholics." Delores

following release are crucial: To see that they sustain their sobriety, to keep them involved in their own treatment. Now all the good programs do."

My dad tells a parable to the members of his Phase III group at South Miami Hospital. He says it illustrates the real dangers for a recovering alcoholic, the gnawing little problems that build up inside, leading to a downfall.

"There's a tall redwood that stretches far into the sky. Almost to the clouds. It's beautiful, but gnarled and twisted here and there. Struck by lightning and buffeted by cyclones, it's survived forest fires and other disasters. One day a group of termites come. On the next, that tree comes crashing down."

"At Raiford you only ate your meals with a spoon and you couldn't leave the mess hall without accounting for it. I winced. Out of all the indignities a prisoner is subjected to, it angered me to think of my dad at 35, so grateful to eat a meal with a knife, fork and spoon."

Morgan, the head of the South Miami Hospital Alcoholic Treatment Program, asked my dad to take charge of a new continuing treatment program, Phase III.

These people have passed through Phase I (a week of detoxification and medical assessment; taking about a week) and Phase II (three weeks of individual and group therapy) within the confines of the hospital. After 28 days they are released. That is where my dad comes in. South Miami was the first clinic in the area to initiate an effective follow-up program. In this case, for two years after release. "The weeks, months and years

My dad and I get along fine. We talk easily and have conversations like any father and son. There is good communication, so good, in fact, that some of it can't be printed. I like to hear his stories, even about prison. They hold a certain fascination.

We were sitting in the living room, and he was smoking, which annoys me and which we argue about, and all of a sudden he said, "Yeah, it was great being transferred from maximum security. At Avon Park which was minimum, I could walk around outside, maybe fish or pick an orange. They even had a table setting." I didn't understand. He explained that at Raiford you only ate your meals with a spoon and you couldn't leave the mess hall without accounting for it. I winced. Out of all the indignities a prisoner is subjected to, it angered me to think of my dad at 35 (he's 58 now), so grateful to eat a meal with a knife, fork and spoon. It angers me still.

I remember the morning I ordered the death of my aging and suddenly infirm Newfoundland dog, Koala. I brought his body home from the vet and buried him. My dad came home from work early that day, shaken too. He walked up to me and shook my hand, and said something about him being proud of me, and me being a man. That meant more to me than anything he had ever said, although it didn't take the sting out of the day. I said I felt like going to the El Toro for some drinks and he asked me if I had any money, and I said some, and he gave me a twenty. On my way out the door he said, "Pete, have one for me." And I understood. I had one for him and a lot of others. I drank and drank and never got drunk. The next day he told me he understood that, too.

He has never taken a strident or self-righteous approach to anybody's drinking. The fact that I drink, he sees as my busi-

ness, though he has said that I'm among the personality types sometimes associated with alcoholics. From time to time, I've found that I drink more than I should. Undoubtedly, more than I need. And writing this has made me wonder. Still, I know that if this was about a subject like a recovery from lung cancer, then every cough that came out of me would chill me to the marrow. I would swear that I had it too. I guess we're all gonna be what we're gonna be, no matter what we imagine. But if I ventured toward hell in a brown paper bag, I hope I have enough of my father in me to stop, too.

My dad has not been working with street drunks for years. But I always heard that you could ask almost any wino and they'd remember him. Photographer Mike Carlebach and I went out one day and drove by four men sitting on a wall — ragged, dirty, hopeless — one clutching a paper bag with MD 20/20 inside. We stopped and offered them a couple of bucks to take their pictures and they said sure, why not? It saved them the trouble of begging it off someone else. While Mike took some shots I mentioned the alcoholism program and asked if they knew any of the names. The line of questioning wasn't thrilling them. They seemed noncommittal and dazed, though alert to the fact that one of the guys had walked off with the money to buy the wine and hadn't returned yet. I happened to throw out the name of Jack Collins. They came to life. One said, "Oh, that Jack Collins is wonderful. That Jack Collins helped me out one time," and "I don't see Jack around anymore. Where is he?" I ruined the scene by saying that I was his son, for by now the wine was there and they really put on a show. They said: "Are you shit-tin' us?" "Well goddamn, let me shake your hand. Any son of Jack Collins is a friend of mine." "By god, you do have the height!" and "Jesus. I can't believe that I'm here looking at the son of Jack Collins. Wait till I tell old Ralph..." and finally, "I never met your daddy but I heard that he tried to help us." And that moment made me feel the best.

No, my dad wasn't the Marine Hero that I spun myths about inside my head and to anyone who would listen; clawing his way up sheer mountain cliffs, enemy bullets digging a silhouette around his body, grunting his way to the top to kill a bunch of Japs with his bare hands.

He was more than that. Rarer still, he was and still is, a man: one who conquered the dark forces and fears he found inside. He's better than I'd imagined.

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