

IN THE COUNTRY OF NO COMPASSION

STORIES BY TERESA KENNEDY

*Many throughout Christian history have perceived a common thread in these parables of Jesus: the grace of God is something that upsets settled human notions about merit, about what is deserved, and what is due as recompense. **Wikipedia***

The Thirteenth Step

Step 1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol; that our lives had become unmanageable.*

There was a meeting in the basement of the Presbyterian church in half an hour. He stood in the center of a minute kitchen, looking at the greasy-faced clock on the yellow wall. Stash L. was coming to pick him up. Stash was a broker who lived in the neighborhood, three months in the program, and still nervous and fragile and needing to talk. Tonight, just as they did every Thursday, the men would hustle down the four cold blocks together, through the ominous wooden doors of the church which always smelled of something indefinable and old, then down the stairs to a harshly lit hall where metal folding chairs stood in rows and fresh weak coffee in Styrofoam awaited their redemption. He fumbled in the pocket of his jeans, looking for his notes.

“My name is Jerry Mahaffey, and I am an alcoholic.” In the odd stillness of his apartment, he didn’t realize he’d spoken aloud, rehearsing, he supposed. It was his turn to give the talk tonight—his anniversary—sober three years now. It was time for another recitation of his history, according to the schedule rotation. The first year they gave him a pin for proof of his commitment. For awhile, he’d worn it fixed to the collar of his old leather jacket. Then summer had come and when he took the jacket out again, the pin was gone—he couldn’t think where.

The second year he’d been asked to sponsor a kid named Jack who’d come out of the Marines with a case of the spooks. Mahaffey had been honored. Jack was young and bright and strong and Mahaffey was sure he would make it. But Jack hadn’t gotten a pin. Instead he’d been mistaken for a deer in the woods and shot last November.

The chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous that met in the basement of the Presbyterian church had twenty-three regulars, give or take. Tonight Mahaffey would stand in front of them at the rickety podium with chipped blonde wood veneer and smile a little before recounting his losses—the string of jobs, two wives, a son that did not know him, grown up now, somewhere in California. He would tell them of the moments he would never get back. There at the podium he

would atone for his sins and display his regrets and assure them there was hope, no matter where they were, or how far they'd fallen.

He would serve them humbly, no longer ashamed of speaking about the shakes and the spiders and of retching bloody, bourbon-flavored bile. Of crying and cleaning toilets in two stints of rehab. Crossing his heart and hoping to die, the story was true—every bit of it. And the regulars, twenty-three of them, give or take, would clap at the end. Some of them, the newest ones, might even weep, though more for themselves than for anyone.

Afterwards, they might approach him, Styrofoam clutched in unsteady hands and compare the depths to which they had fallen, because finding the bottom was different for everyone. They would clap him on the shoulder and thank him for sharing and Mahaffey would promise them hope, of a kind. He knew how it would go. Their stories might change in their details, the details of their suffering exaggerated here and there as was the addict's weakness, but the tale was always the same.

And it had seemed to him lately that each time he heard it, whether his own or another's, the story got further away with the telling. Each time, it meant a little less, echoing through his empty heart like footsteps moving down a hall.

Restlessly, he circled the couch and wished Stash would hurry it up. The past seemed so far removed from this dark winter Thursday it was as though he really hadn't made it after all. It was as though, back in his darkest hours, he really had died—as if he'd lived another life before this one or been reincarnated in an old familiar skin. He walked the walk and talked the talk and went to his work in the mornings and came home at night and at the meetings they held him up as a success and he was grateful. But the man they spoke about was him and not him, too. And it seemed to him lately that his sad biography had, with repetition, ceased to belong to him and become something else altogether.

Step 2. *We came to [believe](#) that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to [sanity](#).*

Four minutes later, he plucked up his leather jacket and put it on and took it off again, thinking about television and leftover Chinese. A vintage Fender Stratocaster beckoned him from the shadows of the small neat room like a genie in a bottle, and Jerry thought of how it would be to skip the meeting and instead let his fingers glide over the neck and the strings and fill up his empty rooms with laughing riffs and soulful sobbing music, loud enough to drown his sorrow in. He stopped himself from thinking it; his neighbors would surely complain.

He'd been pretty good once, played with the best. But that was long ago—before the best got better; before the rest got drunk or drugged or died. He thought it was his father who had plucked the Fender from the wreckage of his old life and kept it for him, but it might have been his mother too; Mahaffey couldn't be sure. There were parts of his life that were gone for good; and he was left to fit the rest together, like the old jigsaw puzzles they gave the junkies to work between med doses at the rehab center. There was one guy used to take the pieces and separate

out all the bits of sky; then the brown for the earth and greens. When Jerry met him, he'd been in for three months on his third detox tour. He never finished that puzzle. Not once.

Mahaffey stared at the guitar, not sure for a minute, why it was there. His parents had driven out from the Island the day he'd moved in here and brought it to him. Jerry had been surprised and embarrassed too. He had not known they loved him and even then could not allow the knowing to put him at his ease.

Now it sat neglected in the shadows, its finish shining softly among the hand-offs and Goodwill furniture, curved in the darkness like a woman with an unrequited love.

It was twenty minutes to seven, and he walked over and plucked softly at the strings—E, A, D, G, B, E.

“Every addict does Grace by ear.” A bass player named Stoner taught him that one, back in his club days. He'd gotten a gig with a band downtown, back when he still believed he was going places. They'd had a lead singer named Grace before she disappeared. She was a bleached blonde with a big ass and a raw voice with lots of blues and pain and junk in it. To him, she had been old, thirty-five to Jerry's twenty. Back then, he'd thought it was funny as hell.

Step 3: *We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of [God](#) as we understood Him.*

Jerry Mahaffey had never seen God, but he'd opened for Springsteen once, in Asbury. It was in the summer, sometime in June. He'd joined another band by then, playing regular and hard for a guy called Casey, an asshole who liked speedballs and shot up between his toes so his wife wouldn't see. The gig hadn't gone well, and even now, looking out of his window and down to the rain-spattered street, Mahaffey winces when he thinks of it.

Casey was nervous that night and high as a kite. Mahaffey remembers his eyes, wide and bright and jittering. In his mind, he hears Casey's voice, the senseless stream of hype and fantasy, punctuated with motherfuckers and shit-mans to anchor his sense of the real.

Casey'd screwed up the sound, Done something to the amps without meaning it, and that band never opened for anybody again. Only Mahaffey had known how awful it was. The certainty of his disgrace had settled in his guts like a cold premonition. And when he'd stayed to watch the E-Street boys, that performance let loose in him a terrible kind of pain, as though something had been born and died in a moment and there was no help for it at all. It was the kind of moment that divided his memory forever into the time before and the time after. A sense of his life that should have been, or might have, and he alone was left to mourn its passing.

That was the night he drank himself unconscious with a girl named Carla until he couldn't remember anymore.

Step 4: *We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

They had the group for that; twenty-three, give or take. Sometimes they broke into smaller groups at the meeting or had a regular shrink come in to sit and point to them, one by one. *“Let’s talk about your weekend, Bob. It is Bob, isn’t it?”*

There had been one meeting, three months before, where Jerry Mahaffey had, utterly without reason or warning, begun to weep. He’d sat with his hands clenched in his lap as Mary G. from seventy-fifth street recounted the night her husband died. Mr. G had departed in a most ordinary fashion, but Mary kept insisting she hadn’t been the same since he’d gone to heaven, and was sharing her feelings of having been wronged—the unshakeable certainty that she’d been cheated of something and also of the pain in her knees.

Seeing his tears, she’d pointed at him. *“You! What are you crying for?”*

He could only sit there for a moment, mute. He could only will his fingers to pry apart in his lap and move toward his face, where he brushed the tears away. He’d made a kind of harrumphing sound in his throat. *“Nothing.”*

“Something,” prompted Dr. Judith, their psychologist for that evening. She was an old woman, with short white hair and a gentle expression and a hump on her back which gave her a perpetual stoop. *“What were you thinking just now?”*

Mary G. piped up. *“I wasn’t finished!”*

Dr. Judith held up her hand. *“In a moment, Mary. Can you tell the group about it—uhh—Jerry?”*

Her eyes were kind and faithful as a dog’s and Jerry felt oddly encouraged. *“It was about a dream I had,”* he answered.

“Aww-shit!” said Mike H, a burly guy with puffy lips and a flannel shirt that gapped over his belly. *“Who the fuck cares?”*

“Dreams can be a symptom.” piped up Johan, a faggot who smoked continually. *“They usually indicate an abuser’s progress in the detoxification process.”*

Mary G. snickered helplessly and flipped her wrist.

“All I dream about is getting laid,” shouted someone from the back.

“Yeah me too,” snorted Mike. *“Like, now he’s gonna tell us he was licking cocaine off Paris fucking Hilton’s ass!”*

Dr. Judith looked apologetically at him over the tops of her glasses. *“Go ahead, Jerry. I think you want to talk about this dream, don’t you?”*

He didn't want to talk about it at all, but it seemed unavoidable. He'd sipped his cold coffee, trying to work up some spit." I was down the shore someplace. Jersey. I could hear the ocean. And in the dream, I was jonesing pretty bad, so I took a ride on the Ferris wheel."

"FUCK THIS SHIT!" hollered Mike, and lurched from his chair.

"Never mind, Jerry," soothed the doctor. "We have no judgments here. Continue, was that all?"

"No. there was a man there with me. He made me feel good."

"How, Jerry? With a drink? Drugs?"

Jerry shook his head. "No—not like that. Just okay, like I used to be. Only I never was. I never felt like that—like I did with that man." He paused and gulped coffee, horrified at the fresh tears that threatened behind his eyes. "We got up at the top of the wheel and it was so far away from everything. I could hear music somewhere and the ocean, too. And I never wanted to come down."

"Well, that's pretty clear, isn't it?" sneered Johan. "Ever hear of a metaphor?"

"Fuck you!" Jerry answered with sudden vehemence. "I told you—it wasn't like that! He told me—wait. I need to remember it. Yeah, he told me something. And then he was gone. I woke up."

Dr. Judith looked momentarily confused and reached over and patted his hand. "But why did it make you cry?"

Mahaffey could only shrug. "Because it was gone. That guy, that feeling. I wanted...I wanted it back."

A little furrow of concern appeared on Dr. Judith's forehead. "Let's not forget how far you've come, Jerry. There's no going back. You know that, don't you?"

Mahaffey glanced nervously around the circle, looking for some hope, some spark of understanding. He wanted to explain about the dream; to shout that it was not what they thought. They sat and sipped cold coffee, their eyes cold and distant and knowing. Maybe they were right. He looked at Dr. Judith and saw the quiet understanding there. The eyes that told him: "We make no judgments here." He stared into the depths of them, struggling to confess:

"The guy, he said something."

"What?" "He said: The last shall be first."

“PRAISE JESUS!” came a bellow from the back of the room, making everybody jump. Tanisha W. was a whore they’d found beaten and half dead from heroin near the mouth of the tunnel last April. She came to meetings trying to stay straight on the outside. Mahaffey only stared at her, astonished. Tanisha W. was lean and crazy and fierce as a tiger, with long keloid tracks crawling like snakes on her tea-colored skin. She leaned her head back and giggled insanely, sharing a secret only she could know.

Step 5. *Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

Now, in his apartment, he felt suddenly afraid. There were four bars and a bistro between his place and the basement of the Presbyterian church. From his window, he could see the neon; a Miller HiLife sign that blinked its warnings over the oily street. There was no reason that sign should make him suddenly afraid.

Closest was Cochran’s Irish, where Stash L. would want to drink diet cokes and eat onion rings after the meeting. Then, at the corner, a homey little Mexican joint with salsa so fiery it made his eyes water and sombreros on the tablecloths and long-necked Coronas were served with hunks of lime. In three years, Mahaffey hadn’t ordered one, but he thought about them now. Jewel’s, in the next block, was for kids. He’d never been in. Sometimes at night, he thought he could hear the deep pulse of the jukebox, or maybe it was the insistent pounding of the bass from one of the anonymous cars at the curb.

Where the fuck was Stash? Mahaffey glanced at the clock, trying to stifle his sudden anxiety. What if he didn’t make it? What if he’d dropped in after work somewhere in the financial district, parked his laptop on a fancy polished bar and said to his stockbroker friends: “The fuck with it, gimme a martini!”

No, Jerry reminded himself. Stash had too much to lose. He couldn’t have been much younger than Mahaffey himself, but he seemed older, somehow. He wore expensive suits and a long overcoat like his father’s. There was a wife, too—a couple of little kids. Mahaffey had seen them once all staring back at him with resentful, anxious eyes from the other man’s wallet.

“She was gonna divorce me,” Stash had confided one night over onion rings. “Can you imagine that? In the Jewish religion, all she’s got to do is go to the Rabbi. And she was gonna do it! Can you imagine it? Take my sons from me? You have any idea what a divorce would cost me? It would have ruined me. So I talked her out of it.”

Mahaffey had not doubted his word. Unlike his wife and her dark-eyed babies, Stash was red-headed and florid, with watery green eyes that held the relentless optimism of a salesman.

“Told her I’d do AA, if it would make her happy. Now, every time she threatens to leave me again, I have to explain about the rule that there’s no relationships until I’m sober for a year. So, even if she wants me back, she can’t have me! Ha-ha. I guess I got her where I want her, huh?”

“Guess—” Mahaffey tried to stay non-committal. He’d watched as Stash swiped the last greasy bits of onion from the plate in salt and sucked his fingers.

“You know what Marissa would do, if she saw me eating onion rings? She’d have a cow, that’s what. Cholesterol. It’s all she can talk about. The kids and cholesterol. Oh, yeah, and her mother. She talks about her mother. And cancer. Her mother’s got cancer. The whole family’s worth maybe 40 million dollars and the old girl gets cancer. Can you imagine it?”

Mahaffey slouched back against the booth and met his eyes across the table. “So what got you, Stash? Guy like you—good job, family. What happened?”

Stash slurped ice. “Downtown—my business—everybody’s fucking nuts, okay? You ever been on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange?”

Mahaffey shook his head.

“It’s fucking crazy. All day, every day. Pressure. From the clients—from the bosses. You gotta stay on top of it. So you do some lines, maybe. Maybe you get a client wants to throw back a few during lunchtime and you gotta go along. Then you go back to the office and you do some more snort so you can stay on top of it. Make the money, be a success. And all the time you’re killing yourself, only you don’t care, man. Because just being there—it’s the best fucking high in the world. You know what I mean? The guys down on Wall Street—they rule they world, you know that?”

“I guess, but—”

Stash leaned across the table, his arms straight out, his hands folded in front of Mahaffey in a way that made Jerry think of supplication.

“So all day long they’re screaming at you to make the money. The clients are screaming, and the bosses are screaming and the brokers are screaming and the guys in the pit. But you do it, because them that can do it can rule the world. You make a couple of million a day and you’re on top of the game, okay? Can you imagine it? Believe me, you never want to come down from that high. And then you go home and you try to tell somebody about it—you want to share it with somebody. Only the kids are already in bed, so maybe you try to make love to your wife and instead she tells you about the kids and the cholesterol and her mother’s cancer. She don’t care about anything else. And pretty soon you get to feel like all you want in this world is to be alone for five minutes. Because you’re already alone. Inside your head. You want to make it so nobody wants a piece of you every minute of every day. You want it quiet—with nobody screaming and nobody nagging you about how you’re gonna die.”

Step 6: *We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of [character](#).*

Stash paused and motioned for the check. Stash always paid the check after the meetings. Mahaffey always let him. As they waited for change, he went on.

“I used to do blow all day. Then I came home. After Marissa went to bed, I crawled into a bottle of Chivas every night when it was quiet. And I could be alone.”

He scooped up his change and threw a dollar on the table. Mahaffey stood up and Stash’s eyes sought out some object through the window, passing in the street. “Very unusual thing,” he said. “For a Jew to drink like that.”

“Hey, no judgments here.”

Stash pointed to the ceiling “Oh yeah? What about up there?”

Mahaffey managed a little smile. “I don’t know.”

They got to the door and Stash shoved it wide with his shoulder. “You want to know what’s funny, Jerry?”

“What?”

“All I wanted was to be left alone. And then, when I was? I couldn’t stand it.”

Step 7: *We humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.*

They’d headed out into the freezing air where holiday lights and tinsel swung from the lampposts, battered crazily by the wintry winds. Mahaffey shivered, remembering it.

They’d parted at the corner, Stash thumping him awkwardly on the shoulder as he drew his long overcoat about his middle.

“Thanks, man.”

Mahaffey was surprised. “I just got you to the meeting is all.”

Stash’s eyes watered in the wind. “No, I mean thanks. For listening. Afterwards.”

“No problem, man.”

Stash looked at him. “You’re a nice guy.” he insisted and thumped him again, too heartily before his light turned green. “You know what they say about nice guys, don’t you?” he called out over the traffic. And was gone.

Step 8: *Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*

His cell phone vibrated from his shirt pocket, just above his heart. He took it out and stared at it. An unfamiliar number blinked at him from the screen.

“Mahaffey,” he answered uncertainly.

“Jerry?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s me. Can’t make the meeting, dude. I’m up to my neck here. Fucking maniacs in Tokyo started something. Believe me.”

“I believe you,” Mahaffey replied. “Don’t worry about it. There’ll be another meeting.” And with the words he felt something ease in him, as though he’d suddenly ceased holding his breath.

“You got any money? In the market?” Stash’s voice was anxious and tight.

Mahaffey smiled at the absurdity of the question. Stash wasn’t coming. He was free. “No.”

“I gotta go, man. Tell them—tell them I—you’re my sponsor.”

“I’ll tell ’em.”

“Tell them it’s not me. It’s Tokyo.”

Tokyo. Mahaffey replaced the cell phone near his heart and plucked up his leather jacket from the chair. He glanced at the clock and wondered what time it was in Tokyo. He wondered what they’d started there.

Step 9. *Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*

It wasn’t until he’d reached the bottom stair, three flights down, that he thought not to go to the meeting. He turned toward the Presbyterian church and it seemed to him not a decision at all, but a certainty that rose up from some unknown place inside himself, suddenly a given. He paused at the intersection and, renegade, the image of the girl rose up in his mind. The blue butterfly tattoo on her shoulder; her arms extended into the night. A motion caught from the

corner of his eye; the way he'd turned to see hair streaming out like wings behind her as she fell from the balcony. Jumped. Jumped or fallen. Fallen or flew. And inside the music was playing and the room was jammed and the party went on and on until someone besides Mahaffey had finally screamed.

For some wrongs, he knew, there was no amending.

Step 10: *Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.* He stuck his hands in his pockets and headed into the wind that blew ceaselessly off the river. There were four bars and a bistro between here and the Presbyterian church. He settled on the one he'd never been in. A woman reached the doorway at the same moment and together they went inside.

It was brighter and more crowded than he'd expected, with few empty seats at the bar. Jerry blinked uncertainly. The woman took an empty seat and shrugged out of her coat and Mahaffey could see that she was pretty, in a way. He took a place next to her and on the other side of the room a booth of six burst out in laughter. Happy Hour. He remembered the sign out front. He looked around him.

Jewels was a more upscale place than he'd figured. The bar was filled with people talking, having their drinks on the way home from work. Some chatted with friends or co-workers, or read newspapers. The woman who'd come with him seemed by herself and placed a paperback book on the bar. Oily meatballs in a kind of a sauce and something else heated over Sterno to his left, and some of the patrons wandered back and forth among the evening's offerings with paper plates and wine glasses. Regulars, Mahaffey figured, feeling awkward. Or not.

We have no judgments here.

Step 11. *We sought through [prayer](#) and [meditation](#) to improve our [conscious](#) contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for [knowledge](#) of his [will](#) for us and the [power](#) to carry that out.*

"What'll it be?" A portly, middle-aged bartender, came to them and swiped at the spotless bar with an efficient sort of air. Mahaffey hesitated.

"Pinot," said the woman. Her voice was low and sure of itself. She glanced at him expectantly.

"Bourbon, neat. Water back." He sounded more confident than he felt, but there was no going back.

Their drinks came in moments and the girl opened her book and sipped her wine. He thought he could feel her glancing at him, looking up from the page. Her eyes were bluish; her hair was brown. He hoped she could not see the trembling of his hand.

He picked up his glass and swallowed. The drink was sweet as honey and sharp in his throat. Over in the corner, someone played the jukebox and Springsteen was singing about being on fire.

Mahaffey set his bourbon down again. It twinkled at him from the glass, dark as a potion. He pushed it to the side, thinking he might sip again. Or not. It held no mystery anymore.

Step 12: *Having had a [spiritual awakening](#) as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

“Haven’t seen you in here before,” the woman said to him.

Mahaffey looked at her more closely; she had a mole on her cheek that charmed him in a way he could not explain. He blinked a couple of times while he tried to think of some way to respond.

“First time,” he answered finally. “I pass by a lot, though. I’m in the neighborhood.”

The woman nodded and tilted her head approvingly. She closed her book and sipped her wine. Easy in the little bit of silence between them. She had a generous sort of mouth that made him think of sharing. Feelings and leftover Chinese.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m temping around the corner. Very boring. Data entry for the bank.” The way she said it made certain he knew there was more to her than that. “I’m Lisa, by the way. Lisa Haines.”

She held out her hand to him in a formal way and he shook it and let go.

The words came out of him before he could stop them. “My name is Jerry Mahaffey and ...”

She raised an eyebrow and smiled curiously. “And?”

He blushed and smiled back.

“And I just...Am.”