

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

Jack Swenson

The Snake Farm

There were four of us in the room at the spin dry: Father Chaos, the biker priest; The Long Ranger; Sal, and me. I was old man. Sal was a school administrator and ex-boxer.

We were at O' Reilly's to get sober, and to learn how to stay that way. Mack O'Reilly was the boss, the owner and operator of the rehab. He was a rough, tough workingman from the back streets of Chicago. He knew what was what. He had been there, done that. He entertained us with his stories of the days when he was a homeless drunk, a bum, living in the alleys in The Windy City. It was cold in the winter, he said. A hard life. Alcoholism, he said, was a bitch.

He taught us how to get sober. Willingness was the key. "You got to have a desire to get sober," he would say. That was the only requirement for membership in AA, but you had to have it. No ifs, ands, or buts. You had to do what you were told. Get a sponsor. Do the steps. Read the book. Go to meetings. It was simple, he said; yet most alcoholics die drunk.

One day my roommates and I were lolling around in our room after lunch. I asked Father Chaos if he believed in God. "Of course," he said. He spelled it differently however, he said. He spelled it G-o-o-d.

Sal laughed. Ranger looked from one to the other. He was a tall, skinny young fellow with a beard and eyes like beacons. He looked deranged, and he probably was. He had a sense of humor, though. Somebody asked him one day how he got his nickname, and he just grinned.

I told them that I was having trouble with the concept. "You'll come around," Ken said. Ken was Father Chaos' real name.

"I guess," I said. Ken told us the story about the priest who died and went to Heaven. When he got there, he opened his eyes and said, "Oh my God, it really is true!"

After the afternoon meeting, Sal and I went for a walk. It was a beautiful day. The rehab was in the wine country east of San Francisco. The sun was shining, and the air was hazy, like the air in France or Italy. I told Sal I didn't think I was going to find God. "Sure you will," he said. Sal was Catholic, but I didn't have to believe in his God, he said. I could find my own. That was a novel idea to me. It took me a while to figure out what he meant, but when I did, it was a revelation.

In the days ahead, one by one we packed up and went home. We gave Ken a big sendoff. He roared off on his motorcycle. When Ranger left he got as far as town, and the next day he was back, drunk. Sal went back home, and we kept in touch. He stayed sober and became the superintendent of a high school. I was the last to go. When I left, one of the counselors gave me a book of daily readings. "Be good," she said, and she gave me a hug. I wasn't, but eventually I got sober.