

The Taste of Ashes

(Continued)

returned to her eyes, which again were red from weeping. She pleaded with me, alternately threatening and begging, but to no avail.

I continued my daily broadcast, but gradually it became more and more impossible. The voice of which I had been so proud was broken and scratchy. My lips would form words but no sounds would come forth, my face contorting as I strove wretchedly to enunciate.

For the first time, complaints from stations poured in to ABC for "letting a drunk go on the air."

After this, the end wasn't long in coming. By early June, 1956, it no longer was a question of my work and my home. It was becoming a matter of life or death—and life appeared a certain loser.

I could no longer perform because my lips twitched uncontrollably, my mouth was fever-dry, and my throat felt as if I was swallowing razor blades. The words which were my livelihood simply wouldn't come any more.

One night, Harriet sat staring at me as I jerked nervously about the room in tigerish torment, then she suddenly burst into tears. Miserably helpless, I simply stood there until she cried herself out.

"Sit down, Bill, and listen to me," she said in a dead, lifeless tone. Her next words seemed to knock the breath out of me. "Bill, I can't—no, I won't—take this any longer."

We talked for hours, as we had so often in the past, but this time there was a difference. Harriet now remained coldly adamant.

Putting aside what remained of my pride, I called a doctor.

But not for drugs. I explained that I wanted the name of an institution which would take me and keep me until I was cured unquestionably, no matter how long it took.

We decided on the Institute of Living in Hartford, Conn.

It was a beautiful day, that morning of June 16, 1956, when we started out for Hartford. Harriet drove in silence all the way. As she pulled to a stop in front of the buildings which were to be my prison, she said, "Well, Bill, we might as well go in."

A tall young man in a tweed suit came up to us. He held out his hand, level eyes regarding us appraisingly behind horn-rimmed glasses. "Mr. and Mrs. Stern? I am Dr. Gordon Edgren."

After Harriet left, Dr. Edgren talked casually for a while, then asked, "Do you have any medicine with you?"

I handed over the Demerol tablets to this big easygoing man who assured me I would be given all the sleeping medicine I needed that night and that someone would be with me constantly during the first few days.

"But our biggest problem," he warned, "is really the matter of sleeping medicine. I do not regard the drugs as being half as menacing as the sleeping pills you are taking. That is the crutch which

has helped to lead you back to drugs."

The first few weeks were all that I had expected. But, painfully, gradually, the worst of the drug-withdrawal symptoms subsided. I was still taking as many as 16 sleeping tablets at night; but

very slowly Dr. Edgren started to cut down, first to 12, then to 10.

For several days I received eight pills, but they didn't seem to have their previous effect. When they were brought to me the next time, I cut them into pieces.

Four of them were decoys, sugar-coated pills masked in the same outer covering as the sleeping tablets.

I flew into a rage. Did they think they were dealing with a child? I slyly determined to get even. During the daily

psychiatric session in Dr. Edgren's office, I tried to balk his every move, and I continued to fight against withdrawal of sleeping medicine with every device I knew.

The days dragged on through July

and August. Then in September there came a crushing climax. I had a severe kidney-stone attack and, as fate would have it, Dr. Edgren was away from the Institute.

I was taken to the nearby Hartford

Hospital, where morphine was administered. It was like touching flame to a powder keg. My awakening voracity knew no bounds. When the nurse refused my demands, I screamed and cursed, ripping up my bed covering and

becoming so wild that I was moved to the psychiatric ward.

Unable to quiet me, the doctors at Hartford Hospital called Dr. Edgren and asked that the Institute come and get me. Within the hour, four attendants entered my room to take me back. When one of them took my arm, I smashed a fist into his face; but I was forcibly restrained and removed.

When we arrived at the Institute, I was so violent that Dr. Edgren ordered an injection of Pentothal Sodium to knock me out.

My awakening was shattering. I was in a tiny cell-like room in the disturbed ward, a locked unit for psychotics who are bent on self-destruction or are dangerous to others.

I screamed and raved at the attendants who tried to quiet me. I insisted that they send for Dr. Edgren.

When he arrived, I cursed him fluently. He listened quietly and said, "Bill, the time has come for you to face up to facts. As long as you are here, I am in control. From now on, you don't get a single bit of sleeping medicine."

Snatching up my artificial leg, I hurled it at him. It struck against the wall, scant inches from his head, and clattered to the floor. Dr. Edgren stooped and picked it up.

"I'll just take this with me until you need it again," was all he said. Then he left.

No sooner had he gone than I yelled for an attendant and demanded pencil and paper. I would show them. Who did they think they were, to keep Bill Stern locked up this way? I'd demand my release.

NEXT DAY Dr. Edgren returned, my letter in his hand. "Bill," he said, "you don't want to do this. If you leave now, you'll never get well."

I was imperious and curt. "I want out. That's all I want from you, and what happens to me is nobody's business but my own."

But it was. Dr. Edgren called Harriet and advised commitment proceedings.

When I heard this, I went into another violent rage, soon replaced by terror. Would Harriet let me down?

When she came to the Institute, she asked Dr. Edgren one question. "If he is allowed to leave, will he go back on drugs?"

Dr. Edgren's reply consisted of one word, crisp, authoritative, and final: "Unquestionably."

That word settled the issue. Harriet agreed to have me committed.

I sank into complete despair. The Saturday before commitment was to become final, I waited behind the locked doors of the ward, unconscious of the other poor souls around me. One of the attendants turned on the television set. It was the opening football game of the season.

"This will be a good game, Mr. Stern," he said. "But I guess you've seen so many of them that it's hard for you to work up much interest." At that moment, something stirred in me. Not interested? I'd have given anything to be back as a part of that excitement,

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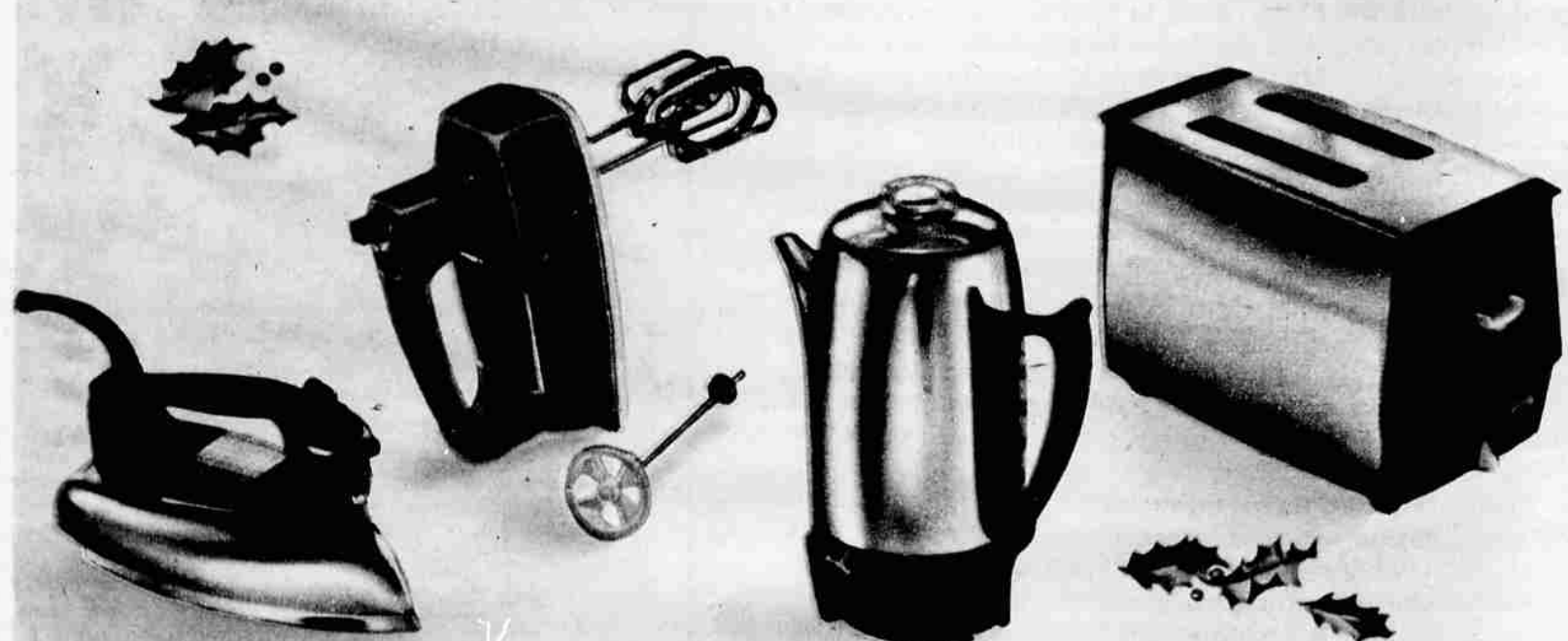
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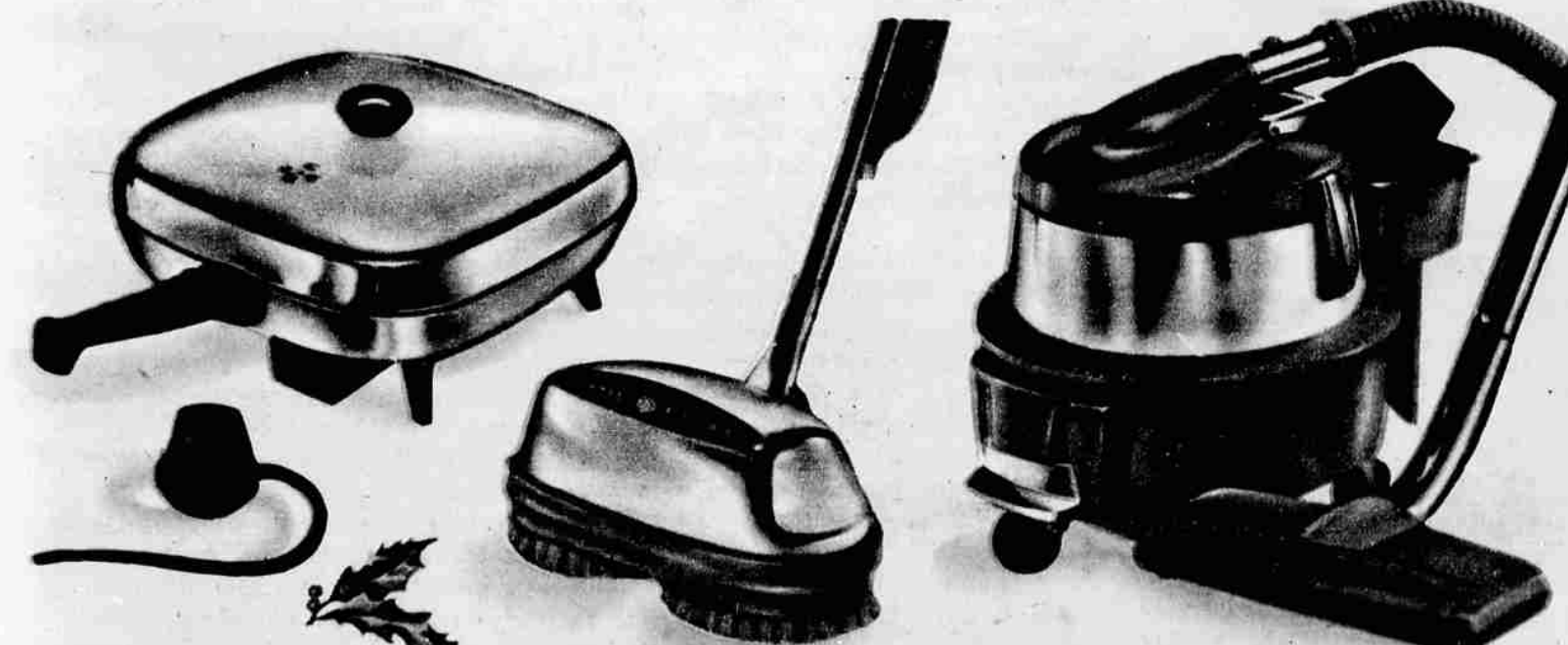


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