

Black Hammers Falling

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THE SMOOTH, YOUNG DOCTOR SITTING BEHIND THE WORN VICTORIAN DESK, wearing a pressed shirt and a cheap green wool tie, asks me when was the last time I drank.

“Four weeks ago,” I answer, matter of factly, and some three-headed dog inside me craving alcohol sits up and growls. Four weeks? It feels like four days.

An hour ago, I was standing beside my hospital bed looking out century-old windows, watching patients smoke on the grounds of Homewood hospital in Guelph, ON. Leaves—orange, red, mottled yellow—were falling from surrounding trees. No one recognizes anything beautiful here.

How did it come to this? Five weeks in rehab for alcoholism. Stopping is not the issue. But staying stopped? I think of my two small children at home, and my wife who is divorcing me.

“How are you feeling?,” the doctor continues. I snap back to the present. Suicidal, embarrassed, missing my kids, really scared. He notes these things on a large clipboard. He wants me to rate my suicidal ideation on a scale of one to ten. I hit a solid eight. No real plan per se, but lots of self-destructive thoughts. I hate drinking. I hate alcohol. But I hate that other people can drink it more. Resentment like a poison penny falls into the empty well inside me.

Looking at the doctor’s office—his medical degrees, the other patient’s files stacked neatly in manila folders, the one sad looking plant sitting on the corner of the desk—I realize I have used up my share of wishes.

“While here, you will be required to test regularly for alcohol use,” the young doctor continues. I nod my head in understanding. Blood tests. Urine tests. I will be required to line up for meds in the morning with other patients: the young Polo wearing father

sadly dependant on opiates after a back injury, the famous book publisher with a taste for red wine and drinking alone, the loud blond mustachioed truck driver harassing all the female patients in the common room, the thin reedy realtor, with a heroin addiction, caught smoking in his room.

I think I am better than them. But I know I am not. Inside me, the three-headed dog growls.

“Any last questions?,” the young doctor says kindly. I shake my head and get up to leave. “People get better here if they want to...,” the young doctor says, “Follow the Program and stay clean on the weekends you go home.”

Follow the program. I spent two years in AA, did not one but two Step Studies, sat through hundreds of meetings, read the Big Book front-to-back, but unfortunately God doesn’t want me as a sun-beam, or I don’t want him, so I was a miserable failure.

I’ve been promised more of the same at Homewood: accept a higher power or else. I know I cannot. I say good-bye to the young doctor, and head back to my room. The black hammer of an alcoholic relapse ready to fall upon my head.

First time I drank beer I was fourteen. I blacked-out. A camping trip with two friends: Kyle and Jeff. We told our parents we were camping out at Moose Bay on Lac Seul. This was in Sioux Lookout, North-Western Ontario. Jeff’s brother Whats-his-name bought us a twelve-pack of Schooner. We then bought menthol cigarettes from a cigarette machine in the lobby of a local pizzeria *The Trapper Shack*.

Someone found six more beers in a garbage bag at the side of some woods. We made camp. We hid six beers under a stump—and then sat inside our canvas tent and drank one. Then two. Then three. Soon, we were giggling and stumbling through the dark with flashlights to find the extra six beers.

An hour later, under a bright Northern moon, we

got on our knees and prayed to the wilderness, vomited out all six beers and then...darkness.

This was before I knew alcoholism existed on both sides of the family, or that chances of becoming an alcoholic increase exponentially if you “black-out” the first time you drink. I woke up the next morning with puke in my hair, but I felt reborn. Baptized into adulthood. Empty bottles strewn like evaporating worries at my feet.

We are sitting in group therapy in the basement of Homewood hospital. Alan, the homeless ex-pharmacist, is monopolizing the conversation as usual. My new friend Aidan, the machinist and union foreman, folds his arms and gives me a wink. I breathe deeply, and look at my folded hands. Today I have leather working, plant therapy, and a class on the first three steps of AA: *Step 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.* Step one is a slam-dunk. Easy. *Step 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.* What do they mean by “Power”? *Step 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.* Ah, there it is.... I already know I will fail at Step two and three, but Step four sounds more compelling: *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.* Turn the mirror inward? Yes, that I can do.

The poet John Berryman committed suicide in 1972 by jumping off the Washington State Bridge. He left a note for his wife saying, “I am a nuisance.” He was fifty-seven, a morbid alcoholic, his best poems gone, replaced by daily musings that were but a shadow of his former glory. A “nuisance” is how I feel, too, when I think about my parents, my brother, and my family. But I would never jump from a bridge, or close a garage door with a car running, the way Anne Sexton,

another alcoholic poet, ended her life. Too much hurt. Too much pain to pass on. This is what I think. What I know. A year before his death, Berryman wrote,

“Reflexions on suicide, & on my father, possess me. I drink too much. My wife threatens separation. She won’t ‘nurse’ me. She feels ‘inadequate’. We don’t mix together.”

My wife did not ‘threaten’ separation. She simply separated, quietly, going out four nights a week after I gave up drinking for two years, until finally, I tried drinking again to save my marriage. Twelve months later, I am on medical leave from work, in Homewood, estranged from my family, thinking about John Berryman jumping off the Washington State bridge. I think about this while punching “rivets” in leather bracelets for my two small children.

“Hi, I’m Lisa,” says the small attractive Filipino lady sitting in the large armchair by the window outside my hospital room. Lisa is an ex-nurse with a drug problem, but she is currently winning the war against it. No drugs for two months.

“Hey, I’m Chris,” I say, standing with my towel and tooth-brush in hand.

“This is Blake,” she says, and I casually say ‘hi’ to the male patient, another nurse, sitting in the chair across from her. Lisa is not a favourite of the hospital staff, as she takes blood-pressure readings for older patients if the Ward nurses are too busy. They scold her if they catch her.

Lisa is a collector of broken things so, of course, we become fast friends.

Blake, Lisa and I “walk” together during morning walk before breakfast, sit together in the cafeteria and lecture hall, play boardgames in the evenings. We sometimes drive to a local sushi restaurant, laugh about drinking “sparkling water,” then race back for a

nightly AA meeting. Lisa asks me about my marriage, tries to take the pulse of my availability. I tell her my marriage is over. She says, “Well, let’s not talk about that then....” Lisa is sweet and understanding, but I’m not ready for anything new.

Addiction is a sing-a-long in Hell and, lonely as I am, I’m scared it is not over.

In the eighteenth century, Alcoholism was treated in the following ways: induced vomiting, cold baths, blood-letting, public whipping. Poor people were either thrown in jail, or debtor’s prisons, to sweat out addictions. Rehabilitation as we know it is a relatively new phenomenon. This afternoon I am watching Blake and Lisa bowl, while I imagine what a two hundred year old, white-wigged, blood-letting doctor would think of my two spares?

“You’re up!” someone yells. I grab a bowling ball. I shuffle forward releasing the ball with a tiny spin. A woman beside me cheers and high-fives me. Homewood is part bowling alley, part cocoon from the world of drug dealers and liquor stores. All of us are trying to win.

I’m in the common room with Aidan and Blake and Lisa an hour before curfew, watching a movie called *The Way Way Back*. The whole gang are eating Doritos I bought from a corner variety store down the street. Blond mustachioed truck driver guy finally was sent home tonight for harassing yet another female patient, and I almost felt bad for him, because he cried when they told him he had to leave. He has no family. His loved ones no longer speak to him.

The realtor guy with the heroin problem also was sent packing after snarkily questioning the motives of hospital staff in the lecture hall, and then, arriving drunk on the ward floor after dining at a local restaurant with a few “friends” who came down to visit him.

Famous publisher guy is getting picked up by

his family tomorrow. His skin is glowing, his hair is combed, and he dresses like a bookish, newly sober Brad Pitt. I envy everything about him. The other patients say “Good Luck!” to him when we are in line for evening meds.

Lisa tells me our physiotherapist friend David, who finished the program three weeks earlier, relapsed at a Halloween party in Vancouver. He shot up one more time and died. Patients are devastated. The staff have seen this before.

I’m on day twenty-six of thirty-five, and I have been told by my addiction counsellor Andrew that, although I have stayed sober, my chances of relapse are high because I am resisting the program. I look into his concerned face. I think about my kids. I nod my head in agreement. *I know. I really do.*

After a strained weekend at home, one in which I had to take the bus (because my Ex would not pick me up) and I was forced to sleep on an old futon in my own basement, I am in the Homewood library replying to an email from a poetry friend Rob Taylor. We are not allowed phones during the week, so I sit at a computer carrel to catch up on some messages from the outside world.

Rob wants to know if I’m writing. Are there new poems? I tell him I’m essentially institutionalized, my marriage is over, my life has been ripped apart by alcohol, but I’m writing something new. A poem about the last passenger pigeon named Martha stuffed, and on display in the Smithsonian Institute. It’s a poem about extinction and prayer and atheism. The poem ends with the lines:

I keep thinking of little Martha asleep
in a museum, America’s trophy case,
dreaming of extinction, while families
go to church Sundays, singing hymns,

praying to be taken away. I am afraid
of a world where I may cease to be
which is why I imagine a green hill,
a storm of pigeons passing overhead,
myself a witness to a heavenly host.

Addiction is a slow personal form of extinction, but you get there in time. Extinction both scares and fascinates me. Like an old Hollywood horror movie from the 50’s, the kind that use to come on cable TV after 11 pm when the news was over, I look at my own life through parted fingers over my eyes. I’m told I have to believe in something. I guess I believe in my own death. *Easy does it...*, I hear myself whisper aloud.

In my dream, black hammers fall from clear blue skies so I reach for an umbrella, but instead my hand comes up with a pint of beer. It’s a pint of Creemore Springs. An old favourite. (In high-school, my seventeen-year-old brother worked at the Creemore Springs brewery, and was allowed to take home half-filled kegs to my Dad and I which is where I acquired a taste for it.) I take a big sip, and the black hammers continue to hit the ground heavily around me. I look up and see one tumbling in slow-motion towards me. There is no avoiding it. My family watches me from the shelter of an open door. I hoist my pint towards them, the black hammers keep falling, and then.... Blackness....

Today is graduation day at Homewood. Day 35. Those who are finishing the rehabilitation program stand nervously on stage in the lecture hall. We are meant to say something meaningful about the first three steps of AA to the newbies who sit elbow to elbow in wooden seats.

Some graduates go for laughs, and try to joke. Others cry. I mumble something about one day at a time, but even I don’t believe it. After the ceremony is

over, I see Aidan laughing with his room-mate Carl, both of them getting into trouble. Lisa and Blake come over. We say our good-byes and hug. “I will miss you,” Lisa says smiling.

The next morning, my mother picks me up in her car, and drives me home to my basement cot and my children. “It’ll get better,” my mother says when dropping me off. I get out of the car. I’m still off work for a few more weeks. There is a cold wind. I pull my winter coat around me and look at my house: it is a generic clone of every other house built in this featureless housing development. I hate living on this street full of tech bros, and Conservative party donors. I stare at the bare branches of the tree in the yard. I walk towards the front door. I want my mom to be right.

It has been six weeks since I left Homewood, and I have bought a three-bedroom town-house five minutes from my kid’s place. It will be another three weeks before it is ready to move in. I hired a painter to strip all the wallpaper—the remnants of paisley-obsessed previous owners—and then to paint every wall in the house. I go with light blue for my son’s room, and light green for my daughter’s room.

On a Saturday morning, I drive to a furniture store, and the salesman comes up to me all smiles wanting to “up-sell” me on a queen-sized bed or a flat-screen television. I tell him “I am buying furniture for an entire house.... I am separating from my wife.” The salesman quickly loses the hard-sell, boiler-plate speech, and says empathetically, “I understand. Let’s see what we can do....”

I’m still on the cot in the basement when I get a text from Lisa. *Two weeks until I move in to my new place*, I tell her. Lisa is back in British Columbia. Some military guy she hooked up with at Homewood has flown out to see her, but things have gone south. He started drinking at a restaurant and then made her call her dealer. Now they are back at his hotel room. *He is*

drunk.... and there is all this Coke everywhere...

I tell her to leave the hotel room immediately. She calls an Uber and leaves when military guy goes to the bathroom. Lisa doesn’t relapse. Phew. I don’t tell her I drank on the weekend with friends in London, ON. Lately, the three-headed dog of addiction seems less monstrous, even tame. It whines, waits to be petted, doesn’t growl. It wants off-leash, so I let it. I narrowly avoided a street fight Saturday night. Luckily, a cop intervened, and sent me home with a warning. *Glad you got out of there*, I text. *I’m doing okay*.

A few months later, I am back to work full-time teaching high-school English. I drink occasionally by myself when I do not have the kids, or when I am not seeing my new girlfriend J. I tell myself I have a handle on the problem. My girlfriend J. is great, but she thinks I am a tee-totaller. I’ve been seeing her casually three times a week. I have been avoiding AA since leaving the hospital.

I get a text from another Homewood Alumnus Jason who says he is hosting a few people from the program at his house in Guelph on Friday. Do I want to come? I arrive after seven pm on Friday, and I’m greeted by Aidan, the machinist, who says he is not doing any hard drugs, but only drinking a few beers with the boys. “Me too”, I say, and we both laugh nervously as I walk in the door.

Jason is still sober, and so is Anna who is happy and three months pregnant. Ravi, the Hamilton cop, with a string of DUIs, is still off work, but he says he is pulling it together. I hear Carl is not doing well. He did not come. We have dinner, and no one drinks anything but Coca-cola. We laugh at Jason’s latest silly t-shirt. It depicts a “Giant Cat With Laser Eyes Attacking a Taco.” Jason has reconciled with his brother. He is pleased to be a sober uncle for his niece. It is nice to see all these people, but I’m feeling a little like a fraud. Like I have somehow let these people down.

At the end of the night, we say our good-byes. No one yet knows Aidan will be dead from a drug overdose within a year, leaving behind a two-year-old son and a fiancé. Ravi will soon be back in Homewood again. Anna will “ghost” everyone on social media. My girlfriend J. will break up with me after my life “explodes” because of alcohol one...last...time.

In mid-summer, I take my kids and my mom to Disney World for a trip. I splurge and get the whole resort seven-day meal package. We spend our first day at the Magic Kingdom when suddenly a tropical thunderstorm rolls in, and rain falls in hard wet sheets on everyone. The thunder is deafening. Lightning zigzags the park. I quickly dress my kids in rain ponchos. I push my son in his stroller, but my autistic six-year-old daughter starts running around, screaming in child-like terror, so I call to her to stay close.

I can barely make out her shape through the hard tropical rain, and the river of people moving slowly towards the buses at the front entrance. Sometimes life is an amusement park. Sometimes, a torrential storm. I find myself in both places at once. Is there a more perfect metaphor for alcohol addiction?

The last time I drink, I do it at the end of August when I have the kids. Something I promised my Ex I would never do. I make dinner, and drink three-quarters of a bottle of Chardonnay.

After dinner, I wash the dishes, put the kids in the car, drive five minutes to the local supermarket to buy two more bottles of wine. I get candy for the children. I know I should not be driving, or drinking, but I do it anyway. At Homewood, there was a lecture by one of the doctors explaining that the part of your brain hard-wired for addiction is the primitive part. The reptilian part. The “three-headed dog” part.

What does this mean? It means addiction does not

live in the part of your brain that houses your personality, your decision-making, which is why addicts make promises they break over and over. I let the kids stay up—and I crack open a bottle of Chardonnay. I watch a television program about murder, and a family, and a beachside resort in Florida.

I begin to laugh a little too loudly, and my daughter asks me what is in the glass I am drinking.... At 2 am, I wake up in my bed with my daughter wide-eyed staring into my eyes. I clearly passed out, blacked out, and now both kids have climbed into bed with me. “Daddy is pretty silly, eh?” She nods slowly, and my heart breaks. In that moment, I know I’ve had my last drink.

The next morning, I call my mother, brother, father, J., and my Ex to tell them what happened. My Ex quickly picks up the kids, and I drive two hours away to my Dad’s house. I shiver in his guest bedroom sweating the alcohol out. I call Aidan who is still alive, for now, and he says he will drive over from Barrie to talk to me, but I say it’s okay. I never see him again.

In the following weeks, my Ex and I revisit our parenting agreement so it says I can’t have the kids if I am drinking. I sign my name to it and I start going to one AA meeting a week. That is all I can manage, but I do it for three years. My girlfriend J. is initially supportive but, after a few months, she breaks up with me. *I totally understand*, I say.

I didn’t understand, but I do now. Alcoholism is the troll under the bridge of one’s life. A suicide bomber in Toys R Us. A monster in the labyrinth. A three-headed hell-hound. A black hammer dangling precariously above your head, ready to fall at a moment’s notice—but you can grab it if you are brave enough, and cobble together a sober life. One day at a time. Even one story at a time. This just happens to be mine.