

NICE RECOVERY



a memoir

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Hate to Be You If I Were Me

I SOMETIMES IMAGINE my pre-drinking personality as a rich field just waiting for some mind-altering substance to come along so that my alcoholic self could sprout and flourish. But in my case it wasn't the first drink that took root. This was a bit disappointing, at least from a storytelling perspective, because when you enter recovery for alcoholism and/or drug addiction, everyone wants to know about your first drink. It's supposed to be spectacular and set the stage for the complete wreck you later became. In an ideal war story, the first drink should end with you falling down, throwing up, and, if at all possible, in prison for an armed robbery and attempted kidnapping committed during a blackout.

Unfortunately, I only dimly remember my first drink. This fits with the fact that I can't remember most of my childhood. When I tell my story, I usually just pick an early drinking experience that illustrates the fact that right from the beginning I had an unusual (by which I mean unusually enthusiastic and dramatic) reaction to alcohol. But when I really think about it, I recall two first drinks.

I took my first drink at a wedding. I was eight or nine. The wedding was held outdoors in the country and was one of those all-day affairs that slowly disintegrate into social anarchy and moral dissolution. The wedding started at eleven in the morning, and by nightfall there was no one really paying attention to us kids.

We marauded around like a group of short bandits with severe attention deficit disorder who couldn't decide what to steal first. The freedom was heady and a little dizzying.

We went charging past one of the guests' cars, an enormous panelled station wagon, and I noticed a pair of brown leather dress shoes protruding from underneath the front bumper. The shoes were attached to the feet of one of the guests at the wedding party. Contrary to appearances, he was neither working on the undercarriage of the car nor dead. He'd chosen that somewhat curious location to take a nap.

"Is he okay?" asked one of the kids.

"Sure. That's Mr. Ronson," said my cousin.

"What's he doing under the car?" asked the first, who was not a blood relative. Anyone from our genetic line knew exactly what the man was doing under the car.

"He's passed out," explained another of my cousins, with an air of infinite, unflappable world-weariness.

I was impressed with Mr. Ronson's resting place. There was something so final about it. Nothing was going to disturb him, unless of course someone started the car and ran him over. Mr. Ronson probably wasn't the drunkest person at the wedding, but he appeared to be the most peaceful. I'd already been in plenty of situations, especially social ones, that made me want to retreat under a car. It seemed that you needed to be an intoxicated adult to actually do it.

"Should we tell someone?" I asked.

"Nah," said one of the older kids. "He's happy where he is. Let's go get ourselves a drink."

The bartender originally stationed in the bar tent had disappeared some time ago and the rest of the adult party-goers

who hadn't gone home or passed out had disappeared into the still, sultry night to talk and drink in little groups.

The tables in what had been the dining tent were covered with empty bottles and glasses. The plastic tablecloths were crusted with melted wax from the candles that had been jammed into Chianti bottles to lend a little class to the event.

"Here," said one of the older kids. He handed me a half-full wineglass.

I inspected it carefully.

"Go ahead. There aren't any butts in it."

The other kids, ranging in age from seven to twelve, stood watching solemnly. I had no real desire to try drinking, perhaps because of the spectacular results I'd seen it produce in some of the adults around me. But something about the restful aspect of those shoes poking out from under the car had captured my imagination.

I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip of wine, trying to ignore the lipstick marks on the rim. My eyes watered and my stomach churned as I drank it down.

"Cheers!" said one of the older kids. He poured the dregs from several glasses into one. He took a powerful swig and I could see him struggling not to vomit.

And that was it. My first drink, after which nothing much happened.

LUCKILY FOR STORYTELLING PURPOSES, the second drink had a better arc to it. Let me set the stage. As I moved out of childhood into adolescence, I was disappointed to discover that I wasn't socially gifted. This can be explained by a few crucial factors. First, I spent an inordinate amount of time wandering around in swamps

imagining that I was a young, female Gerald Durrell. Second, as a kid I was happy to chat with anyone and tell them, in more detail than was wise or necessary, what I thought about almost any topic. Third, I expected the best of people.

In spite of the fact that I was socially delayed, I had some friends. Up the hill from our house lived a family with three young girls, one of whom was my age. At home I had three brothers. The oldest was five years my senior, the younger were six and seven years my junior, and I felt a bit marooned between them. My lack of female siblings caused me to romanticize the notion of sisterhood to a nearly pathological degree. I was obsessed with *Little Women*, and as soon as I met the sisters up the hill, I wanted to spend every moment possible at their house, pretending I was one of them. Giselle, Christina, and Denise's commitment to the world of make-believe was absolute. I was a hardbitten realist in comparison. They played elaborate games, some of which took entire days, including the Hungarian Bulgarian Good Guy Dance Contest, which involved making up routines to suit songs on their Mellow Moments eight-track while wearing unfortunately hued leotards. They'd devised a kidnapping game that involved sending elaborate ransom notes in a made-up language, loosely based on the sounds made by their chickens, and they did death-defying routines on a stick and rope. These performances were scored using the Olympic system.

Giselle, Christina, and Denise and their lovely French-Canadian mother welcomed me into their family. Giselle, who was my age, was like a charitable foundation of one. She very kindly overlooked the bossy and annoying qualities that caused other kids my age to avoid me. I loved the girls' intensely social world but was also aware of being the extra, the one-of-these-things-is-not-like-the-other.

When I wasn't peering into mud puddles in a swamp, lecturing adults and other kids on my opinions, or "chicken talking" with Giselle and her sisters, I read with the focus of someone breathing through a straw. My reading wasn't confined to books about sisters. I read anything I could get my hands on.

Looking back, I'd have to say that it may have been a mistake to use books as a guide to life. This is because books misled me about a few things. Thanks to warm-hearted stories like *Anne of Green Gables*, I expected to encounter kindred spirits on every corner, as well as gruff but caring old people. Rather than ridding the world of gritty books, book-banning advocates should pay more attention to banning sweet books that set up false expectations. More Brothers Grimm, less Trixie Belden!

Books hoodwinked me into believing a set of lies about what was and was not important in life. In books and in my family, having a good vocabulary was crucially important. When I went to school it turned out to be a serious liability. In books a lack of concern about clothes and personal appearance showed solid character. In school such unconcern spelled social disaster. In books knowing a lot about a lot of things, such as breeds of horses and varieties of pond scum, was admirable and likely to be rewarded. At school it pretty much guaranteed that everyone would think you were a show-off and a bore and would shun you. In books people were mostly nice, and the ones who weren't nice were easy to spot. In school villains were everywhere and they were well disguised.

Had it not been for the society of Giselle and her sisters, I would have been completely friendless. And the more trouble I had with people, other than Giselle and her sisters, the more twisted my personality got. I seemed to be afflicted with both shyness and overbearing confidence, a uniquely loathsome combination.

This, plus a haircut that rendered my gender indeterminate, caused most would-be peers to avoid me. The rest used me to work out their aggressions. The more I was bullied at school, the more my paranoia, self-consciousness, and self-centredness grew. In other words, my field grew ever more fertile. A few other hapless kids and I rotated in and out of the uncoveted position of “least popular.” Even a short-lived transfer into Catholic school didn’t help.

By the time I hit middle school, I was suffering from a case of school-induced post-traumatic stress disorder and felt nothing but despair about the future. For the first seven years of school, I’d tried to tell myself that every little cruelty or betrayal or instance of meanness was a mistake. But by the time I started middle school I was convinced: other people sucked and so, more importantly, did I. What I learned from kindergarten through grade six is that everything I’d thought I had going for me was, in fact, a handicap. By grade seven I knew that the only solution was to change everything.

The old blues guy Robert Johnson is said to have stood at the crossroads and sold his soul to the devil. Others have made similar pacts in a variety of locations, such as at the bedside of their first-born. If the devil had come strolling by our house the morning before I started grade seven at Chandler Park Middle School, I’d have hit him with as many offers as a used SUV dealer in a gas crisis. “My first-born? YOURS!” “That extra kidney I’ve got kicking around? TAKE IT!” But the devil didn’t stop by, unless he was disguised as one of the mean girls who cruised the hallways like bull sharks. I was going to have to be the author and engineer of my own personal revolution.

That is why the morning of the first day of grade seven, for the first time in my life, I agonized over what to wear. In previous

years, Giselle's mom had sewn Giselle and me matching dresses. They were usually flowered and ruffled and made long-legged, long-haired Giselle look like a cross between an angel and an advertisement for laundry detergent. I looked more like a young boy experimenting with his sister's clothes. This year I was going to strike out on my own, fashion-wise. But what to wear? I was too old for the orange jumpsuit with the pictures of cats and interesting burn holes from stray cigarette ashes. Maybe I could still fit into my suspender pants? No luck. I tried on and discarded everything in my closet. There must have been three entire outfits lying on the bed when I decided on jeans and a white turtleneck. Surely no one could be offended by jeans. Giselle and her sisters were getting a ride with their mom that first day, so I caught the bus, turning over my agenda in my mind.

The first thing I had to do was to get some more friends. There was safety in numbers. What I needed was one of those peer groups I was always hearing about. Giselle would, as always, slide effortlessly into the nice girl category. I needed my own group.

On that first day at middle school we were all in the same boat. Everyone was looking for somewhere to fit. But everyone also seemed to know how to meet people, what to say to them, where to stand, and what to do with their hands and face. I didn't have a clue. So the moment I entered Chandler Park Middle School, I began to study my classmates, who came from elementary schools all over town, as though they were exotic fauna in a zoo. It took me less than a day to figure out who was cool and who wasn't. The ability to detect such information seems to be encoded in the DNA of the average thirteen-year-old, even one as socially tone-deaf as I.

The popular kids were too far out of reach. I might be new to most of them, but they terrified me with their good looks,

enthusiastic, positive behaviour, and normal, happy families who I suspected did healthy activities such as skiing and hiking together.

Next I assessed the jocks. I was reasonably athletic. A good horseback rider and a fast runner, especially when someone was after me. But there was a lot of overlap between the popular people and the jocks. Plus, the jocks had special jock clothes and shoes and I couldn't see going to all the trouble of finding those.

Giselle and the other nice girls were, well, nice enough. But they didn't seem like a natural fit either.

That's when I noticed the wild ones, the baby delinquents. They were the girls who'd already discovered makeup, most notably black eyeliner, and could wield a curling iron like a Jedi handles a light sabre to produce perfectly feathered hair. They were the boys trying on grade-seven smirks and oversized lumber jackets. The wild ones left school property at recess and lunch. They walked together in small dark knots toward an alley that bordered the playing field. Rumour had it they spent their time in that alley smoking cigarettes and even doing some other stuff. They talked in class, slept in class, and sometimes even got kicked out of class. Some were good-looking and some weren't, which meant that they had flexible standards (a real bonus, to my mind). By the end of the day, I'd decided that these were my people, or at least they could be if I played my cards right.