

just pat me on the back, why doncha?
an essay

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There's something extremely desirable about someone who's gone sober, someone that willingly attends AA like a Youth Group leader attends a church lock-in. These people crave the want of a better life, and the need of one, too. And whatever that was, I, too, was yearning for it. I'm not exactly sure why either. Was it because they all behave like they know something we don't? The selflessness and passion the members extend to one another and their certainty of a better future are overwhelmingly inspiring. Still, are their pasts really worth living over again to reach this point?

When I was 24 years old, living single in Charleston, SC, the city voted best city in the world by Conde Nast Traveler (three years running), two years after graduating undergrad, drinking and blacking out were still a part of the norm. After going into a diabetic coma from over-drinking on Thanksgiving day 2015, I decided maybe I should seek help. The thought of my dad laying on top of me holding my seizing body, my mom on the phone with 911, and my grandmother waiting and ready to eat at 3:00 p.m., sickened me. Under my own authority, I decided I would not only quit drinking but partner with the greater masses and attend AA. As anonymous as AA is, it sure is easy to find when and where meetings and events are being held—you just google it. Often, they're in churches, or the ones that I attended were, anyway. On the off days. On the days where the churches just stand in the night while the on looking graveyard waits patiently. These are typically Tuesdays and Fridays depending on one's denomination. You park outside in the lot and make your way past where others continue smoking, holding on to that nicotine as their last resort. Knowing that it's the only thing that will keep them clean. You talk, hug, joke. The older folk talk about their families, some intact, others being restructured or deconstructed,

etc. I met this kid one time who brought this girl with him and it was their first date. As an onlooker it didn't seem to go well. Not the best place for a first date—or any date for that matter. Not only is it suppose to be anonymous, it's also a very vulnerable venue, a safe haven for practitioners who are trying to iron out folds. The location is not intimate, fancied, or an area to explore the other's anatomy. I would go with friends when I went. The distant friends, the ones who you'd see when getting an oil change or the ones who you'd bump into at a movie. Or friends of those friends. I am not bold enough to go somewhere like that alone. A bookstore, yes. AA, no. Though if there's anywhere you'd feel welcomed, alone, it would be AA. You will not be judged, I promise. The area is indefinable. It's sad but I can guarantee your story won't be in the top five of the scariest, heart-wrenching plots you'll hear. The shit you hear. Some people can find the punchline in their reasoning. You just never know.

Coffee, raffles, cookies, expired cookies are all available on a table past the entrance. More mingling. Some people get seated early, some are praying (it's not church but for some it is the closest thing). There is no communion, no Nicene Creed, but there is companionship, positivity. There is a belief in good fortune. Perhaps Karma, too? I once won a koozie as a raffle prize. The community inside laughed and said things like *Oh, that'll be good for a cold one* or *Whatcha gonna put in there?* It was pretty funny.

Usually they feature a speaker. Someone who frequents the particular meeting that's taking place, a regular. That individual tells his or her story of how they came to 'seek help' or why they've decided to 'open up'. It's a beautiful thing. Again, some can make their stories funny but

the majority can pull a tear or two. This thing, it's genetic. Most people wouldn't pick this route out like they would a present in a white elephant during the holidays. Families have been ruined, children have been fostered, people have died.

It's fucked.

The first time I went, I had to talk. I had just drank four nights before.

"Hi, I'm Brennen and I've been sober for four days."

The group response: "Welcome, Brennen."

The next guy said, "Hi, I'm Patrick, I'm new to town. This is my first day." Come to find out, Patrick had just relapsed after thirteen years of sobriety. That's a fucking punch in the gut. To hear, to see. Someone who's been sober some odd years to break and start at day one. My heart aches. A reading from the Big Book happens at some point, usually in the beginning. Less formal than church but really one of the only church-like things done at a meeting. And they're called meetings not services, so that, too, differentiates the organizations. I never went long enough to pursue a sponsor but a few members reached out to me. I respectfully declined. I wasn't ready for a sponsor and I wasn't sure a sponsor would be ready for me. These were business men, soccer moms, doctors, farmers. It's genuine, their hope. And then there was me. A fool.

A few close friends of mine knew about my personal research and self-questioning: "do I need help" and "is this path something I should continue to follow?" My ex-girlfriend knew, a few guys at work knew, and my parents knew. No one, I think, truly expressed their thoughts on the

subject except my parents. Both of them said something along the lines of *good job, happy to hear it*, and *we didn't think you had this problem*, in a tone of disappointment. But, wait, surely they were happy I was getting some help, right? Or maybe they just thought I was a young immature idiot, which was also right. I would lie to my other friends, the ones who I thought would judge me with responses like, *dude, just don't drink as much* or *you don't have a problem because you don't drink everyday*. And that was true, I didn't drink every day and from what I know you don't have to drink every day to have a problem. There are variations and degrees of this disease: people who drink everyday, people who drink all day, and people who can't stop when they start, or something like that. That was me. I could go months without a drink but when, at last, I had one, which was usually on a Friday or Saturday (I wouldn't drink during the week, I wasn't that bad), I would go from 0-100. I was that guy. It upset me, but I knew once that threshold had been passed, it was on. I was convinced. I've made some dumb mistakes while drinking: skinny dipping in the college fountain behind the library, peeing in my parent's bedroom closet (while they were asleep). I have other stories, too, I'm sure, but those are the two I am most often reminded of by my friends and parents.

I stopped attending meetings after my sixth one. Sure, alcoholism has affected my family. My mom's brother and sister had their battles with it. But the truth is, it wasn't affecting me.

Life as a twenty-four year old affected me.

A post-graduate life as a bellman affected me.

I'm not upset or frustrated, nor do I feel the slightest bit of regret because it happened. I wanted to be at AA, to have that devotion, to be a part of the dynasty, but I didn't want to be an

alcoholic. And I wasn't. The realization was that I have control over my habits, hobbies, and limits. The people who this disease affects do not. And the ramifications of that are more real and tragic than peeing in a parent's closet (pee can be wiped up, clothes can be washed).

I still have the Big Book on my bookshelf, maybe even next to The Bible. They both keep me humble. I still drink, too. I haven't blacked out in a while but yeah, I'll have that beer. In fact, to this day, I still use the koozie I won at the raffle. I wouldn't say I would never go back to an AA meeting—if only for the camaraderie, laughs, the mystery of it all.

But if and when I do, I won't be bringing a date.