

The Alcoholic  
by  
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Two men drink in a bar on borrowed time. The one, a young man, is having a grand old time, dancing, laughing, and socializing with his friends and some pretty young things nearby. The other, an old man, sits silently, solitarily at the bar, somberly watching the game. They are completely different men with completely different lives, but a more curious truth is that they are actually the same man with two different stories that end the same way; for the old man was once the younger, and the young man will share the old one's barstool soon enough. Only the one, only the older one, knows this to be true; and only because hindsight is always twenty-twenty. He does not tell the younger man, because there's no way in hell he'd believe him.

There is a truth about people that distinguishes us from each other in a way more profound than any other. It separates us into only two kinds of people, and in this separation one can foretell the future. The truth is that one person will live a life in bliss, with occasional bouts of discontent. The other will live that same life in silent agony, with occasional bouts of bliss. I need not say which life the alcoholic lives.

I can't adequately explain to a sober person, or rather the first kind of person I described, what imaginary weight the other carries on his back. All I can say is that it is a perpetual thing, and that the burden, while manageable initially, is crippling when carried consistently—all one needs to know about the alcoholic is that he carries this thing his whole life long. The irony of it is that the weight is not a weight at all, but a void—and such a thing weighs on a person more than the heaviest thing a person can shoulder. I know such things because I am an alcoholic, and I don't go to the meetings. I pity those who do, actually—they think alcoholism is a disease that can be cured. But what they don't realize is that their body needs that alcohol—not physiologically, as the doctors would have you believe, but psychologically; because once the alcohol is gone, all that they have left is their life—and it is their life which was the very reason why they started drinking in the first place.

A man once wrote a book called “The Present.” The title was misleading and completely accurate at the same time. That is because “The Present” is actually what it sounds like—a gift—but the gift it was referring to was the present—meaning the present moment. The moral of the story was that to be happy, one had to learn how to live in the present moment.

Return to the young man in the bar—laughing, dancing, socializing. He is a man of vision, truly. He has ambition, and a work ethic to kill a mule. He graduated college ready to jump into the workforce and work valiantly toward his vision. His strategy was to be an English teacher. He figured that with the summers off, he was free to create, to strategize—to either write a book, or buy

real estate in need of help, and do a few fix-and-flips to supplement his teacher's salary, settling himself into the comfortable lifestyle of the middle class, and—who knows? Maybe break free of it someday.

So this young visionary—his modest ambitions, while ordinary to some, but visionary to him—this young man tore off the indentures of four years of academic restraint and went, school to school, head held high, proud of his achievements, confident in his demeanor, selling himself as the fine educator that he was—but it was not to be. One school district after another—one more, then another—how many applicants applied for this job you say? Ten thousand? And my prospects? Well, thanks for keeping my resume in your file. And so the young English teacher, still young, still ambitious, turned away from teaching, turned back to his roots—turned back to writing. Refreshingly pure, unstifled creativity—fiction. No more 'No Child Left Behind' to contend with, no more administrative shackles and inadequate curriculum to work around—just freedom. Just expression.

So he sent submission after submission, to magazine after magazine, wrote short story after short story, article after article, waiting. And waiting. The debt piled high, forced to take a job to pay the bills, still waiting on responses, still looking for his break, still working at Jimmy Johns, still breathing, still existing, still in limbo. Soon the bright future he saw ahead of him is now the dim present he never saw coming. Soon the bottle makes that dim present brighter, one late night at a time. Soon a man who lives for the weekends—lives in the present moments of the nightlife.

The old man sitting across the bar has a similar story, but his age allows for more to follow. He found a job, eventually—decent paying, decent work. He even kind of liked it. He was twenty-four then, and bought a new black Camaro. Looking for love now, wanting to find a good woman to marry and settle down with, but also impulsive, prone to move quickly and fall easily. Independent now, young, attractive, living in his own apartment that he paid for, on top of the world, he knocks up a girl he hardly knew. He doesn't know it yet, though. She tells him a year later. He, recently happy, recently in love, has a fiancé now. Now, he breaks the news to her. Now she cries, heartbroken, now he's single, now he cries, heartbroken. Now twenty-five, a one year old in tow, the mother in a world all her own, still single. It's a rare woman who wants to raise another woman's kid. That woman, years later, still unfound. Living in limbo, living for the weekends, the clock ticks by, and the man plants himself at the barstool—sixty, single, somberly watching the game. They are different men, though. We are all different men—though our stories are the same—the story of the alcoholic.