

Sobering

“A college student can’t not go to art openings...! There’s free wine—they might not card you.”

~Anonymous

My first experience with alcohol was entangled with the experiences of my grim tweenagehood. From ages ten to twelve I was held hostage in my own home, and for half of it I didn’t understand just what danger I was in.

This all has to do with Jack W_____, my mother’s boyfriend soon after she and my father separated. Stockholm’s Syndrome unconfirmed, but I took to him like a small girl who was desperately used to being taken on camping trips and being bounced on a knee that still smelled pretty strongly of the paper mill her father worked at. Jack’s knee stank too, but of alcohol. Mom had an unconscious awareness, I fear, of a thing neither of us was entirely aware of for the first two years of his reign over our household; she scolded me for trying to hug or roughhouse with Jack.

Over cheap, rented movies Jack would take a possessive hold over my mother and lounge on the couch. His hold was both physical and chemical—he encouraged her, a smallish woman who had been quite moderate all her life, to guzzle freely of the skunky beer he brought to us by the caseload. The unease in me only began when I noticed how often mom, Jack, and I would have to pause on outings to venture to the ABC store—at least twice a week to replenish the house’s supply of twelve-packs.

The unease grew when Jack brought to us the puppy. Formerly named “Flop” (his brother, stricken with a heart valve problem from inbreeding, was named “Flip”), I refused to call him anything but Sam, after Samwise Gamgee, Frodo’s reliable and somewhat rotund friend. Sam, after a bit of growing and as much training as he could comprehend (he seemed to have caught the brunt of any mental disability that the inbreeding offered) later earned the “-wise” and the rotund.

Once on a burning concrete porch, full summer, Sam waddled up to Jack and begged for a drink, never having been taught the difference between a bottle of water and a bottle of *Miller*. Jack poured half the beer on the ground, laughing with cruel pleasure as Sam started to drink, sneezed in discomfort, and weaved unhappily away. The unease built up in piles like dirty laundry under the bed.

My mother was the one whose unease had the greatest cause to be growing. She had witnessed Jack, cackling like a devil, slipping *Smirnoff* into my *Mountain Dew* during the last night of a campout. I can only assume that I became terribly drunk and passed out; I have little memory of this, and most of it included hopping about and crashing into things, believing myself to be a frog. I woke up in the Volkswagen van with a splitting headache.

The morning after that campout, she became weak and shivery in voice and spirit. She developed a welt that I couldn’t remember being there the day before, and I wasn’t given time to wonder if she had fallen and hurt herself, or had gotten it during the campout.

“You want to go on a vacation?” She asked me. I agreed, but was confused by this sudden turn towards the recreational. I asked if Jack was coming.

“No. No, no, no...”

We got into the Jetta along with a pair of small bags she had packed for both of us. She seemed grim, but her eyes were bright and gleaming with some kind of cynical satisfaction. We drove forty miles away, to a small motel in the Hot Springs area—it was bordered by pastures where horses were left out to graze alongside whitetails which displayed a Disney-like level of friendliness towards humans. I was enthralled with the place.

Jack was not there when we returned. He had been picked up by the police later in the morning that we'd left. Court proceedings followed. Jack had been hitting my mother for months in drunken delusional rages, but it had escalated to the point of no return the night before when there was finally a mark to damn him. He'd threatened to either take away or shoot our Sam if mom did not pay him \$200 dollars to keep him. Mom had paid up—who knows how a man who treats another human being with such fierceness would treat a loveable but scatter-brained mutt?

It was a year or so after that when I discovered a website for looking up criminal records. I entered Jack W_____’s name, not expecting to find much except the battery charge he had been recently locked up with. I found myself staring into a starved-looking face that I recognized all too quickly, with liver spots corroding the razor-like cheekbones, gray-brown hair grizzled everywhere. I scan the list of charges until I find one that I was not aware of from our families’ encounter with him:

Sexual Assault of a Minor, N. Aggravated.

After that listing, something much worse:

Aggravated Battery; Rape of a Minor.

The girl had been the ward of his previous intrigue. Confined to a wheelchair, fourteen years of age, speech impaired but still functional enough to get by in a daily routine, given that she had someone to drive her places and help her control her wheelchair. The court, though, had lessened his charge since it was decided that this mentally incapacitated teenager had “provoked” Jack with obscene language. The girl’s caretaker had walked in the room to find Jack had ripped the girl out of her chair and thrown her against the bed, and only when the door opened were her watery cries for help audible.

I had been thirteen at the time of his escalating violence, and that scared me.

Sometimes I have dreams about drowning, but I’m drowning in something rank and obviously not water. It tastes thoroughly nasty and strongly of alcohol, the sort of alcohol that only the addicted and the long-past-drunkenness are capable of drinking.

I once avoided this sort of stuff at all costs, and not just because it brings out the bad memories. I told myself I was more of a wine-and-daiquiri person. Since I’ve been legally allowed to drink, I drink very sparingly. My tolerance levels are extremely low. People who drink heavily are impossible to hide from me because to be quite honest they smell of a mixture of horse and stale piss. Stale *horse* piss? Perhaps that’s down to the individual’s hygiene. Perhaps I’ve only been catching wind of the unsavory sort of drinkers.

I caught wind of two on campus the other day, one of which I know and am adamant is only nineteen. But whatever. If they won’t listen to their HHP courses, and they won’t listen to D.A.R.E. officers, and they won’t listen to their own reeling nausea and violent puking episodes, then only an

experience like mine or the countless others who have been sideswiped, stepped on, messed with, or even what happened to the poor girl who came before me, will ever make it through the static.

That's if they *haven't* already metastasized into full-grown Jacks. I would like to think of it that way even if I know humans are less thoughtful and noble than we think ourselves to be. I wish it was just the corrupting drink—the poisonousness of over-indulgence that forced reasonable and compassionate minds over to a point of no return. But that's not so. It's a chemical and nothing more, but it is worn like a wolf's skin in Viking days. They wore a husk of an animal to draw out the ferocity of it, but a dead wolf is even less a violent brute than a live one.

The real attacker was underneath the matted fur and tannin-soaked skins, ecstatic with the fight. Later, when the blood cleared from the berserkers' eyes they could suckle mead and laud the power of their skins—their excuse, really, but they at least embraced that fact. Today the berserkers' skins are blamed for their Viking-esque rages and raids.

But it's only a chemical. It is no more vicious or evil than the water vapor hanging in the air between this text and you. No more or less deadly than the air you breathe now. Alcohol has no claim on our souls. It shoulders none of the blame of our actions.