

I Need A Drink

“I need a drink”.

I glanced to my right and saw a middle-aged man walk into the bar. He sighed and sat a few stools down from my friend and I. It was a statement familiar to regular bar-goers, but one that, for most of my life, I failed to truly understand the meaning of. The man clearly didn't *need* a drink, but he felt compelled to say he did, anyway. It was his way of saying that he had a...

“Rough day, huh?”

The bartender, a tall, well-kept, bearded man named Nick walked over to the man in question while polishing up a tall beer glass. The man ordered one of the beers on tap and, within a minute, Nick was back with the same glass, now full of the brown fizzy ale.

Alcohol is a depressant. It doesn't do anything to actually improve one's day, yet it serves that purpose for a ridiculous amount of people. The phrase “Rough day, huh?” shouldn't be followed by drinking poison, but it is anyway.

That was how most days ended for my mom, with that same interaction. It didn't take place at the bar, it was at home... but it wasn't always that way.

I would be busy doing homework or playing video games or whatever else and would be interrupted by the hum of the garage door opening. When I was real young the sound excited me, as my mom brought with her this overwhelming aura of excitement about my day and my interests. She'd come in and I'd run across the house to the entryway to be greeted by her with an operatic “I'm hooooooooome!” followed by a “How was your day, Matty?” (I was called Matty back then). I would talk her through everything that happened at school and after, my thoughts moving faster than my mouth could feasibly spit them out. She would get down to my height, on a knee, paying close attention to everything I was saying. Dee, my babysitter/third grandmother, would smile from a distance with a toothy grin, making sure I got everything I needed to say in before she even opened her mouth. Dee and my mom would only converse after I ran off to go back to do whatever I was doing, and after a short 10 minutes, she would leave and my mom's attention would revert straight back to me.

But as the years went on and my mom went from job to job, the demeanor slowly started to change. Instead of exclusively hearing about my day, my mom would begin to talk to me about her day as well, including Dee in the conversation while pouring herself a glass of wine. Instead of kneeling, she would merely maintain loose eye contact from a distance. I heard tales of her boss around this time, a woman named Lori. I never got a visual description of what she looked like, but as my mom showed disdain towards her character, the image in my head became more and more witchlike over time.

Soon, it came to the point at which the stereotypical alcohol-focused discourse took hold. My mom would still greet me and ask how my day was, but quickly blurted out the “I need a drink” only to receive the obligatory “rough day?” response from Dee, whose smile slowly faded to a neutral expression. Her complaints were always similar and always revolved around Lori, this evil evil human being that represented the worst of corporate America. Either that or she was a perfectly reasonable person who my mom happened to disagree with. In reality, it didn’t matter as the association was clear. Before Lori, Mom was happy. After Lori, Mom was not.

So, in an effort to try and partake in this conversation that was far beyond my understanding, I would try and beat Dee to the punch. Whenever my mom said “I need a drink”, I’d butt in with my equivalent of the “rough day” response: “Is it Lori?”

My mom eventually quit this and would spend about a year looking for new employment. It was exciting for me to occasionally see my mom at home when I got back from school, but during these periods she was always “busy” or “couldn’t talk” because she had work to do, filling out application after application. As such, Dee was still around during this period, as she would take care of me and the errands while my mom continued to stress herself out. When she did finally come downstairs at the end of her self-appointed “apply for jobs” work day, she would continue to make a beeline for the wine bottle.

Clearly it wasn’t Lori who was the source of the problem, then. After all, if Lori was the wicked witch that turned my mom onto alcohol, then why was she still drinking now? Why did she still “need a drink”?

The first memory I have of my dad drinking is the first memory I have drinking: an accidental sip of a gin and tonic at the age of 7. He would occasionally make these drinks for himself, but

his consumption wasn't something he turned to in the way my mom did coming home from a long day in the office.

My dad always told me that I "saved his life". He rarely went into specifics, but would say that he wasn't "a good person" before I was born. I would later learn that his not being "a good person" involved copious amounts of sex, drugs, alcohol, and other arguably irresponsible activities. Most of that was cut when I was born, with the exception of the gin and tonics and my stepmom, who he met years later at a high school reunion.

His dad left when he was really young and never bothered to reconnect with my dad until he was in his late 20s. He wouldn't and couldn't do the same thing to me, so when my dad left after only a year of being with my mom and the two tolerating each other's presence, he made a conscious effort to make sure that he talked with me on the phone every single day that I wasn't with him. There was even a period when I talked to him twice per day: once in the morning while waiting for the school bus, and again later in the evening after my mom had gotten home from work. Around this time, he had just started a job at a community college near his house after over 10 years of self-employment and freelancing.

Whenever I spent time with my dad, his attention would be almost exclusively focused on me. We would go out on adventures and actually do things. Instead of coming home and hearing about what I did, we would make our own stories to reminisce upon during every phone call.

This frustrated my mom, as her job was in many ways harder than my dad's. His only responsibility as a parent was to send a check every month, with practically everything else being compulsory. Meanwhile, my mom not only had to work full-time as a single mom with bills to pay, she also had to manage my own needs and requirements, from doctors appointments to haircuts to eating three meals a day. Her time with me was reality, and my dad's time with me was "Disneyland", as she called it. She had to turn to alcohol when she got home because she was stressed. My dad didn't have to turn to anything because his life wasn't nearly as stressful in her eyes.

This was the primary catalyst for the number of lawsuits my mom made against my dad throughout my entire life. Instead of working civilly, she instead turned to the court of law to force my dad to pay more child support or medical fees because that was the only thing she had control over. The intention wasn't one out of malice, but instead of jealousy: if my dad had

to deal with the stress of the lawsuits, that would at least somewhat mitigate the amusement-park-like experience I had with him. Maybe then he would “need a drink” or two.

She was right.

At first my dad was incredibly successful at the community college, moving from a low-level marketing manager to vice president of the college within seven years. In doing so, however, he made a lot of enemies, and his later years at the college became defined by a series of attempts by lower-ranking employees to sabotage his job.

With this, my dad became more and more delusional and proud. His angry retorts to these sabotage attempts carried over to his personal life and directly affected his relationships with family members. After a few drinks, he would regularly threaten to divorce my stepmom on a near-weekly basis with me overhearing on the phone, and regularly threaten to disown me over minor disagreements between the two of us. Whenever this happened, he would wake up the next morning with a hangover and a desire to apologize.

The most substantial example of this came when Dee died after my sophomore year in high school. I had just talked with her on the phone a week prior and she sounded exactly as she always did: happy, healthy, smiling, and proud. The news was stunning to everyone who knew her.

The funeral was scheduled to be three days earlier than my scheduled departure from St. Louis, a fact which I reiterated to my dad the second I heard the news. In his intoxicated state, however, all he heard was “three days early”, and that set him off. He pressured me to stay for the rest of the trip, arguing that this “was what Dee would want” and trying to argue that my mom had deliberately scheduled the funeral to conflict with his “parenting time”.

My dad would always spout these crazy conspiracy theories while drunk. According to him, my mom had coordinated with doctors, falsified information and documents, and made everyone in my life aware of how much of a monster he was... all in the name of sabotaging his “parenting time”. Since he was in a work environment where everyone was trying to take him down, he convinced himself that my mom spends all of her free time plotting against him.

Of course, this wasn't the case, but I took the bait and told my mom that I wouldn't make the funeral. I hated myself shortly after and ended up arguing with him for the entire night. But, as always, my dad woke me up with a list of flights departing the next day and a seemingly-heartfelt apology.

This song and dance would continue over and over and over again, and it got tiresome. When home, my mom would come home and "need a drink"; and when I was with my dad, he would come home and "need a drink". Throughout the rest of my high school experience, there was no escape from the spirits haunting my relationship with my parents.

College, then, felt like paradise, and it couldn't come sooner. Instead of trying to have a meaningful relationship while living with my parents, I could finally be myself and control the relationship I had with my parents while living on my own. I trained myself how to respond to things my parents said in ways that generally pleased them... or at least got them to shut up. Instead of actually engaging with them, I told them what they wanted to hear. It didn't heal my wounds, but it enabled me to ignore them, and that was good enough.

One time, during my freshman year, I got a call from my dad that I wasn't expecting. Usually, I wouldn't hear from him until evenings, but this call was in the afternoon. I had just gotten back to my room after my last class for the day.

"Ummm... I have a question," he said.

"What is it?"

My dad explained that he drank way too much the night before and got sick from a hangover that morning. He had to take the day off work, and was embarrassed that he had to do so.

"How do you stop?"

"I don't know, Dad..."

"Like when I drink... I feel like I need to get to a certain point. If I get *here*, I'll be good..."

“I don’t think I drink for the same reason you drink.”

“Why do you drink, then?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I drink socially. I drink because the things I drink actually taste good. I drink because everyone is drinking. It doesn’t really mean much to me.”

I wasn’t lying. I didn’t go to a single party my freshman year. I only ended up drinking in small groups, playing card games with friends or whatever else. At the time, I was your stereotypically lame college student.

“Maybe you should get some help, Dad.”

“I just have an addictive personality and... I don’t think I can control myself sometimes. Maybe you’re right.”

My dad has yet to get help of any kind to this day.

Over the next few years, it got worse.

I was set to go visit him over my 21st birthday, and he surprised me with a 3-day trip to Las Vegas after the New Year. It was a really nice gesture, and given the shows we were scheduled to see, I couldn’t have been more excited.

The final night was perhaps the most exciting show in my books: the legendary Penn & Teller magic act. I hated magic, but I loved these guys from the videos I had seen. I couldn’t have been more excited to see them. My dad, meanwhile, was less excited.

We had started off the evening by meeting up with family that my dad clearly didn’t want to be in the same state with, let alone the same dinner table. He downed two gin and tonics during that meal. Then, as we were saying our goodbyes, he went to a random server in the hotel casino and ordered a third gin and tonic. As we went into the magic show, he got a fourth. By the end of the performance, my dad was very clearly wasted beyond belief.

As we lumbered out of the hotel, he would constantly feign interest in my excitement in the show. At one point, I was called up on stage, and he used this bit of knowledge as his token of proof that he may have paid attention to at least something that happened that night. He would say it over and over again, and I would respond with “I know”. This led him to believe that either I was lying to dismiss his claims or I didn’t actually know, so he’d say it yet again. A vicious cycle indeed, and far from the real interest my mom expressed in my well-being all those years ago.

We stepped outside and my dad immediately freaked out, trying to find the sign for Uber pickups. Uber was this new thing to my dad, as he was introduced to the app in Vegas. Of course, instead of reading, he bolted off in the completely wrong direction.

When my stepmom and I tried to catch up, he took that as an act of defiance and immediately retorted with his usual drunken banter that he would divorce my stepmom and disown me. As we continued to try and get him to calm down, his anger grew and grew. Eventually, he couldn’t take it anymore.

He turned around and grabbed my stepmom by the collar and threatened to hit her. I knew I couldn’t stand by idly and watch that happen, so I interjected, getting my dad to let go. We thought he was done, but after taking a few steps back, he yelled, turned around, and charged right at me. I dodged out of the way. I ran back into the performance venue with my stepmom, reeling. “My dad just assaulted me,” I said over and over again.

We watched as my dad walked across the street and made it to the taxi line. A security officer walked up to us and asked if we were okay. We lied.

When we made it back to our hotel, we found the room locked from the inside. Even the keycard wouldn’t let us in, as my dad had used the deadbolt lock to bar us out. My stepmom and I used this opportunity to go for a walk and debrief. The debrief ended up being over 4 hours. My stepmom said that she would leave him if anything remotely resembling this ever happened again, and I said that I would leave the next day not with them to Illinois, but back to my mom in New Jersey.

But, as always, my dad woke up the next day with a hangover and an apology, and we both caved. He didn’t even remember what happened. As I walked him through every beat of the story, he bowed his head in shame. It was the closest my dad had ever listened to me, and he

couldn't even look me in the eye. He promised not to drink for the rest of the trip at a bare minimum, and I promised to leave if he took another drink. Neither of us kept our promises.

After the rest of the trip, I came home to my mom, who was the same person she always was, but I also came home to friends who already knew about my story and couldn't have been more supportive. We decided to meet up the night of my return at a friend's house. I would be the last to arrive, as my flight got in late.

I knocked on the door and was let in.

"How are you doing?", my friend asked.

I paused to reflect over what had transpired over the past week, the past month, the past year, the past life. I remembered back to the times when my dad would call me every day without a beat, ask how I was doing, and I could actually tell him. I remembered back to the times when my mom would walk into the house with all the enthusiasm of the world, ask how I was doing, and I could actually tell her. I remembered back to the times before my mom ignored me and before my dad assaulted me, and despite claiming to be fine without them, I longed for those times to come back.

The pain settled in, and I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. Rough day? More like a rough life.

"I need a drink."