

You're Breathing My Relapse

by Ted Laramie

I was an alcoholic for ten years, starting in my early twenties and continuing into my thirties. Then finally, after many attempts, I got myself straightened out. My son's birth finally did it for me. It wasn't like a switch flipped in the delivery room and I was suddenly healed, but as I learned to care for him over the first few months of his life, I realized that I wanted to be with him for as long as possible. If I kept drinking, then that wasn't going to be for long.

So I committed to getting better on my own, knowing that if I failed again I'd probably lose both him and my wife. They deserved better and I wanted to give it to them.

Those first few weeks of sobering up were an all out war. I couldn't sit still. I was sweating all the time. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't do anything for more than a few minutes without my skin crawling off to something else. And as I realized what bad shape I was in, I feared that I'd ruined myself beyond repair. I read stories of other people who quit cold turkey having seizures, heart attacks, all kinds of godawful stuff. I'd lay awake at night, feeling my heart race and stammer like a bad drummer, waiting for something terrible to happen.

And yet, even feeling firsthand the misery of drinking, this voice in my head kept pounding me, "Have one more drink. Just one. You'll feel better. Just have one."

I knew though from my past failures that one drink really meant twenty or thirty, so I gritted my teeth and muscled through it. Just going from the bed in the morning to the bed at night without drinking was a small victory. And when I'd wake up in the morning with my pillow soaked in night sweat, I'd feel a little better, a little

stronger. It was quite a difference from the shaky, anxiety ridden mess I'd allowed myself to become. Pretty soon I was further along than I'd ever been.

With better health and more energy, quitting felt like the best decision I'd ever made. The weeks turned into months and the urges quieted down to the point where I might go three or four days without even considering stopping at the store on my way home from work. Still, though, I never knew exactly when the fight was going to pick back up, so I had to stay vigilant, with one eye always on my thoughts. The part of me that had healed was still a lot smaller than the part of me that wanted to destroy that progress.

Whenever the urge to drink would come raring out of nowhere, triggered by some old song or a passing billboard, I'd take a deep breath and imagine that the air was compressing around the bad idea, wrapping it up like a package; then, as hard as I could, I'd push it out, emptying my lungs, sending it flying off to be diluted by the universe. And as long as I kept that up, meeting each wayward urge with a deep breath, I could get through it. After awhile, it became automatic, like an involuntary response. I really thought that I was getting better.

Good things started to happen. I started going to the gym in the mornings, losing weight, building muscle. It was amazing what cutting two thousand extra calories a day did for my body. I was spending more time than ever with my wife and son, actually enjoying it rather than scheming ways to sneak off to smoke and drink. I started writing again, really writing and not just drunkenly scribbling word salads that made no sense in the morning. For so many years, I'd poured all my energy into destruction; now I was creating again, for the first time in a decade, and even something as simple as putting together a healthy dinner made me feel less like a red faced creature and more like a human being.

Nine months into it, I really felt like I had the hang of things. If I were a juggler then I would've had six or seven balls going at once, with even one or two on fire. I was like a machine - getting up at four every morning, going to the gym, getting to work on time,

stretching and walking at lunch, going straight home to play with the family, eating dinner with everyone at the table, getting my son ready for bed with a bath and books, practicing my golf swing in the garage, packing my lunch for the next day, and even getting into bed at a decent hour. I couldn't believe all the stuff I could do. Sobriety was turning out to be some kind of wonder drug. I could do in a week what before might have taken a year to accomplish with half-starts and stalls.

I really thought I was sober. To me, that was sobriety: having the energy and drive to be working toward some greater goal at all times. No more sitting around. No more hiding out. If I was awake, then I was after something - my health, my relationships, my work, even my golf game went from an excuse to binge drink to some semi-professional pursuit. I figured that if I didn't leave so much as a crack in my daily time line, then there was no way that drinking could seep through. I kept my eyes on the balls I was juggling, replacing the grind of drinking with the grind of life. That's what sober people did, right?

Then, all of a sudden, it was a warm Friday afternoon in early May. The air conditioner in the office wasn't working, so they closed up early and sent us home. I was riding the bus at that point, not a regular city bus, but an express bus that only ran in the mornings and evenings, five days a week, from the suburbs to downtown and back again. Unfortunately, getting out early left me with a few hours on my own, a few unforeseen hours, a big hole in my minute-by-minute temporal accounting.

The downtown area doesn't account for much, mostly banks and government offices, abandoned buildings, with a scattering of student housing for the nearby university. There is, however, a small restaurant district. It's centered around a downtown square where people commingle in the evenings. A straggled drifter is always playing a guitar and singing, hoping for some change. Fountains in the sidewalk squirt water skyward for the kids to run through. And at the far end is a decent sized stage where they hold concerts in the summer. Framing it all, little restaurants and bars offer outdoor

patios where people sit and smoke and drink and watch the little patch of world go by. I'd done it many, many times.

I probably should have called my wife and asked her to come pick me up. She knew what I was going through and would've been happy to do it. But I remembered that she was hosting a play group that afternoon, which I didn't want to screw up by asking her drive forty-five minutes downtown with our son in tow and then back home again, all on a whim. I didn't want to admit any weakness, not to her but to myself. So I figured I'd go to the square, which was on the way to the bus stop, listen to the drifter's bad music and read my book.

In the past, I hadn't done well with breaks from the norm, things like getting out of work early or finding myself suddenly on my own. I always turned such things into an excuse to drink. Of course the plan was never to get drunk. It was always to stop and have a few, just a few, relax a bit, smoke a cigarette. Hours later, though, I'd still be swilling them back, talking to some stranger about absolutely nothing, believing that I was having too rare a good time to stop.

Being suddenly left to my own decisions was historically a great way to fall off the wagon. But I knew that. And in knowing it, I thought I was immune from repeating it.

So, walking out of our building, I headed for the square.

Outside, it was like the first perfect spring day we'd had all year -- seventy degrees, a clear blue sky, a slight breeze pushing about the smell of tree flowers. The spring tingled the pleasant air, giving the world that extra buzz of energy that made birds chase birds and me want to do something crazy. By the time I was halfway there, I felt like taking my shirt off, lighting up a cigarette, getting a cold pint in my hand, and saying the hell with everything, just let it all go for awhile, consequences be damned.

And a thought like that could happen just that quick. A minute before, I was sitting at my desk, planning a run after work; the next, I was overwhelmed with this absolutely insane urge to throw it all away, all my progress, all my commitments, everything I'd worked so

hard to achieve in the last nine months, all of it, right out the open window.

But I knew that. And in knowing it, I told myself it was a terrible idea. I took a deep breath, wrapped the terrible notion in air, and pushed it all away, out for the universe to devour. This was a test, I told myself, a big test. I really did think that I could handle it.

So, onward to the square I went.

The place was absolutely bustling, its seams stretched with laughing people, everyone excited as though the entire planet had been saved by a Friday afternoon in May. I think everyone had gotten off early and decided on the same plan. The guy with the scraggly beard was hammering at his guitar, now playing a tambourine with his foot, singing a careless folk song at the top of his jubilant lungs. People in their shirt sleeves danced and clapped along. The trees were bursting with blossoms, especially the poplars and dogwoods, their flowers lighting the place like electric bulbs. The world was celebrating and I felt like some artery clogged fire marshal, there to break up the fun.

Immediately, my attention focused onto a guy about my age, standing at a patio table, alternating between deep drags on a cigarette and long pulls from a cold yellow pint. He was talking to a young woman, gesturing with the smoke as he talked and laughed, about what who knew, though it was assuredly amusing. Her bare feet and naked toes leaned playfully on their table where a pitcher of margaritas sat, waiting for someone with an empty glass. They both looked so damned happy, so carefree, so young.

How was I any different from them? Didn't I deserve a good time once in a while? It was insane to think that I'd never have another single drop of beer in my entire life. Sometime, somewhere I'd have another. Why not now? I could have a couple, bum a smoke, eat some of my favorite fish tacos and enjoy the afternoon, all like a normal person. I didn't have to get drunk. A little buzz would do.

And maybe now that I'd gotten away from it for a while, I could handle it better than before, with a little self control. I obviously had it in spades, not having touched a drop in the last nine months.

It was hard ass work going to the gym every morning, going to work every day, going straight home every night to raise a kid, and then scurrying about to get ready to do it all again the very next day. I deserved a break, damn it. Life wasn't supposed to be a constant grind. It was supposed to be fun once in a while. And a drink here and there was normal. Wasn't that the point of all of my suffering? To get back to normal?

I started toward the patio. I'd bum a smoke, start there. Maybe the cigarette would be escape enough and I wouldn't have the drink. Perhaps I could just dangle a foot over the edge, brush the abyss, without falling to my death. It hadn't worked before, but I knew that. And in knowing it, maybe...

As I closed the last few steps, I opened my mouth to ask for cigarette. Just then, a gust of wind, like crashing whitewater, gushed into the square, rattling the patio umbrellas, shaking the decorative flags, throwing the empty plastic cups to the cement in a clatter. It hit my face, it was cold with winter, and I took a deep, involuntary breath. Take it all, I told myself. I pulled it deeper into my chest, filling myself up like a drowning man breathes water. Holding it, I kept walking, past the patio, past the fountains where the children played, past the big stage, and up the stairs that led away. I didn't exhale until I reached the top, pushing all my terror into the universe. Then I burst into tears.

I didn't want anyone to see me, so I found a shaded corner and cried into my shirt sleeve, sobbing hard a few times. It was over in a few seconds. I wiped my face. My hands were shaking. It was as though the wind had induced some kind of seizure and now every cell in my body tingled, remembering winter. Yes, it was a spring day, a beautiful Friday in May, but it wasn't anything special, nothing to get excited about, nothing to celebrate.

I walked around, through the buildings, stopping to look at the archways and think about myself. My drinking didn't work the way it worked for other people. I couldn't have a few beers, brush my hands together, and jump right back in the race. One beer meant thirty, which always led to the hangover, the guilt, the sickness, and

the immediate urge upon waking to go get more. Once I stepped off that sober train, it was gone. And as I'd learned, it was absolute hell trying to get it to come back round again. Yes, it was true, I had been running myself hard the last nine months, too hard to sustain. I did need a break. But I had to learn to take that break without alcohol. What that entailed exactly, I had no idea.

Up until that moment, I really thought I was sober. I was doing all that stuff everyday, mountains of stuff, cramming the empty glass of every minute with stuff, leaving no room for the drink to fill. But that wasn't sobriety, not really. I'm not sure what it is, honestly, but I know that it must be there somewhere, at some blurred point between the chronic coma of drinking and the hyper-activity of not drinking. How to get there without a map is the mystery.

At home, in the kitchen, I find my wife at the sink and my little boy in his high chair, attempting oatmeal. For the next ten minutes, we all sit around the table and laugh.

