

THE END AT THE BEGINNING

22 SEPTEMBER 2003. WHEN I GOT THE CALL ON MY ANSWERING machine, I was in shock. It was in three languages: English, Guarani, and Spanish. How do you understand a message like this even in one language? Toren greeted us in Guarani, an Indian dialect of South America where he had been working for the past six months in a tiny village. “*Mba’eichepa*,” he said. The greeting means, “How are you?” But I couldn’t reply to a recorded message. So I stood there and replayed it, just to make sure.

“Don’t worry,” he went on in Spanish. And that began a month of worrying like hell, like I had never worried before. I worried about him immediately. I worried about him in the future. I worried about him in the past, about all the mistakes we’d made in our Perfect Family.

“Mom and Dad, it’s Toren. *Estoy en Washington, D.C., No se preocupe*. I’ll call you later. *Todo esta bien. Bueno. Chao*.” All is well. Don’t worry.

Right. I’m not worrying. I don’t know what’s wrong, why he called. He’s supposed to be in South America. Now he’s suddenly in the United States, calling me in the middle of hauling groceries in from the garage. I just got home to this, the mystery message. I don’t even know what I shouldn’t be worrying about, *in any language*.

I imagine all the things possible: he’s very ill, he got into legal trouble trying to get across a border, he contracted malaria. Do they have malaria in the Chaco of South America? I run for a map.

I look up the emergency number in the parents' Peace Corps Manual called *On the Home Front: A Handbook for the Families of Volunteers*. Its offices are in Washington, D.C., and I'm in Washington State on the other side of the country, in a time zone three hours away. It tells me not to bother them unless it's very important. This must be important, but Toren said he would call back. I shouldn't overreact. He's twenty-four. He'll call. I put the rest of the groceries away. I weed our autumn garden, ripping out tired alyssum. I want to phone someone, but whom? And the next three hours stumble by.

When he finally calls again early that evening, the first thing he tells me is that his phone card might run out any second.

"Talk," I command him.

So he does. He asks what version I want. "You see, I've been real honest here and there's stuff coming down. Or should I not tell you?"

"Tell me."

And he does. "It's alcohol."

Alcoholism. It's only alcohol, I reassure myself. Not a really serious drug like crack or heroin or cocaine. I know lots of people who don't drink. They do perfectly fine.

But then I realize all his dreams are shattered—all that effort to apply to the Peace Corps, interview, train, his preparation for grad school—all down the drain, the hours of instruction in Spanish and Guarani. Shipped home from the Peace Corps in worse shape than a housewife on OxyContin. Dethroned from his roots in the jungle of South America where he was working with people he could help, people who were supposed to be worse off than he.

"Mom," he warns me, "I'm sending you some of my writing. Stuff I wrote down in South America last May, titled, '*My Drink*.' It's pretty blunt. You'll read some things about what I did in college. How I wasted it. I'm sorry. It sounds bad. And I suppose it is. I could've worked a lot harder. But I still appreciate all you did and I know it was at least partially a good experience. I hate to have you read this, but I have to be truthful about myself." He pauses, "It's time."

I'm standing in my kitchen on our state-of-the-art slate floors leaning on honed granite to keep from falling over in shock. Solid rock is the only material capable of holding me up. The phone card could expire any second. "When did this happen?" I blurt out. "It's so sudden!"

"No, it's been happening. You'll see. I wrote about it in my journal last May. And now it's September. But I couldn't take it anymore. I realized something was very wrong. I've been having bad side effects now and recently they're really horrible. I'm afraid."

"What side effects? Tell me." I can hardly breathe. We're suddenly cutting out the garnishes and serving up a plain slab of meat. Unsalted. Bland. Cold. I can't believe I'm listening to my son who I haven't seen since January, talking to me nine months later about detoxing in the boondocks of South America.

"It's been worse and worse every time I drank. I get the shakes, I can't sleep, I'm losing my memory; I have leg cramps," he explains.

"But how did you decide to get help?" I ask. I really wanted to know more, like how often he'd been feeling that way, how much he'd drunk, what he was drinking, why he was drinking, and how this could be happening?

"I went to the capital city for interim training. All the volunteers were there. We'd had a lot of meetings, and I couldn't make it through one without the shakes. So I'd go out and buy some *caña* (local liquor) to calm myself, and I hated the feelings that were coming over me. It was getting bad."

"Oh, Toren."

"And so I went to see the nurse. Remember when you told me once about Dustin?"

I remembered. It had been one of those whispered conversations between two mothers bumping into one another a year or two after their kids had graduated from high school, after huddling along the sidelines of football games, after the worries of athletic steroids, drugs, alcohol, and all the fearsome temptations of adolescence. Dustin's mother confided in me, asking me not to tell *anyone* whatsoever. She said that they'd had to pick up Dustin from college because he was having seizures, alcohol problems. But I hadn't kept

my word because, soon after, I heard my boys talking about Dustin at a party of reunited high school chums over holiday vacation, and how Dustin was out of control. So I told my boys what Dustin's mother had confided. It had scared me. And I knew they saw Dustin occasionally, had played sports with him in the past. I thought it might make an impression on them.

"Well," Toren continues, "I always remembered what you told me about Dustin. How serious it was, and I got to thinking, I'm having some of the same problems. So I confessed to Peace Corps, to get some help."

Toren had been assigned to a small village in southern South America where he lived in a whitewashed hut with a tin and straw roof and an outhouse in back. He'd formed friendships with people in his village, planted a garden, and was preparing to work with them on a mutual project. Toren adored his assignment and the South American villagers. Peace Corps allowed him the opportunity to learn languages, to interact in a new culture and, hopefully, to better others' lives. It was Toren's aspiration after college, and he had planned to use the experience as a springboard for graduate work in psychology. I pictured him in South America picking corn, digging roots for his dinner, plucking chickens.

"And what did the nurse say?" I ask him.

"She had to turn me in and a lot happened that I'll tell you later but they medic'd me outta there. Now I'm here in D.C. getting evaluated," he says thickly.

"Are you okay?"

"Well, I had people with me for three days straight, helping me detox. They gave me Valium. It's my last day of it."

Valium, the drug of the 1960s and '70s, for my son. In some remote South American backdrop. I'm holding my breath now. I don't think I can inhale one more time. *I need a drink myself.*

"Valium?!" I almost yell. "Are you sure?"

"It helps me down. Otherwise it's horrible. They didn't leave me alone. Someone was with me twenty-four hours a day."

Alone. It's my fault. I left him alone in that far-flung tangle, in the sticks. And now he's still alone in D.C., all messed up. But,

stupid me, he's been alone for years. He went off to college by himself; came home in the summers, handled his own life, did his own applications for the Peace Corps. By himself. As it should be. Alone.

"But don't worry, Mom. We're working out a plan. I've got a counselor here and we're figuring it all out. I've gotta get back to my village fast—as soon as we get this thing settled. I don't crave alcohol, really. It's just a problem when I drink; I react badly. There's some sorta abnormality there. I think they overreacted when they flew me out but it's just Peace Corps protocol. The thing they do."

"Yeah," I say as offhandedly as I can. Are there any cheap flights to D.C. from Seattle? After all, I haven't seen him in nine months. Not that I could change a thing. But just to hug him. To say it will be okay. That's what I need. And isn't this about *me*, this call to *my* kitchen?

"I've gotta go, Mom," he slurs. "I have homework. The counselor wants to see my journal writing. I'm typing it out for him. And I'll email you a copy. Right away. I'll call you tomorrow. I love you."

When I left for the market earlier today, my son was living in South America working for the Peace Corps. By the time I returned home to put the groceries away, he'd become an alcoholic headed for rehab. So what happened between the produce aisle and my driveway? Toren's father, Don, is at work. He would want to know about this situation. I could call him at the hospital. I could email him since he picks up messages in the OR between cases. The subject title should be—"Sit Down." There's no granite counter in the operating room.

So, do I start at the end or the beginning when I tell him? It's hard to know just where we are.

MY DRINK

by Toren Volkmann

21 May 2003

Age 23

A long night of drinking used to make me tired...now it makes me stay up and shake. I'm an alcoholic. I guess drinking like an alcoholic for about eight or nine years was part of the problem. Luckily, it was fun as hell.

Now what? Cocaine? How can I find a new identity when I used to drink mine by the fluid ounce and then turn around and juggle reality?

I thought the problem with being an alcoholic was you just drank a lot. I did that just fine and things were great. No one ever said, "Dude, you're gonna start losing your money, your memory and, above all, your longevity and tolerance..." as if just being shit-faced and happy every night weren't enough, "...and when you stop a mean bender you're going to be a fevering, shaky, paranoid halfwit for a day or two who can't think, sleep, even relax or eat until withdrawals are over...." That page of my D.A.R.E book must have been ripped out, right after the one part I do remember that said all the bad kids always had fun and got all the chicks.

I used to be able to handle the worst of hangovers, wear it like a soldier wore a uniform, or drink it off. I could deal with hellacious sleeplessness from drinking for a day or through the night, maybe ending up in some random bed and still charging through class, ball practice or family happenings like the dark angel that I was...even the torrential blackouts that would be reported or random acts of split personality. My friends and I always gave ourselves alternate drinking names (My name was Poren), as a joke, saying, "So and so did that, not *me*." It was nothing to be

ashamed of in 'the glory days.' Things are changing and what I once thirsted for and sucked on with the finest appreciation, shared with the warmest of friends in the best and most fucked-up times, is beginning to scare me.

It's not the urge to drink that I don't have power over—this hasn't been the case (24 pack where are you?). Rather, what was once all benefit and reward—raging parties, boring conversation turned into passionate arguments, blaring music and endless cigarettes, slurring exchanges of understanding (or even unfaithful or unwarranted kisses)—now seems to be packaged with much more unpredictability; I now have increased difficulty controlling my level of intoxication.

More importantly, there is an equal reaction corresponding to the amount of alcohol consumed in regard to the eventual detox. This is the big problem. During detox, inside the unsettled body, a nervous and sometimes nauseous sense begins...an anxiety and almost a fear, like being too alone. You see yourself and everything differently. Like a sudden collapse of the stock market of your brain and every single nerve ending in your body wants to turn inside-out and puke out some unidentifiable pain or itch. You sweat, and you sweat increasingly when you let unreasonable thoughts trick you into feeling like whatever you are thinking must be true, like for example, (hhhhmm...) maybe another drink will solve the problem.

I went to college each year and would return home for summer break to live with my folks and work by day as a groundskeeper. But really, I lived for the weekends, and everything worked out perfectly that way. I would go up to Seattle and rock all weekend, hardly eating and just shooting the shit (loving it always), cracking beers from the early morning, and turning over what was remaining from the previous night. The weekends were endless parties, fiascos, adventures. And always intoxicating.

That last summer at home, I grew to hate Monday mornings at work, or sometimes Tuesday, too. It wasn't due to a headache or hating work. I liked being outside and listening to all the jack-offs on talk radio with their big opinions and constant advertising. But more and more, I would be tired. Sunday nights or Monday nights I would find myself in bed at 9 or 10 p.m., knowing that I may not

get to sleep until 4, 5 or 6 a.m. My legs would cramp sometimes, or ache depending on how bad it was, or how much I had drunk. I'd have sweaty, sudden convulsions just as my body began to relax or fall asleep. I would be scared to fall asleep and lay awake frightened, having no clue what to do, in total dread until it would finally subside enough to let me sleep. HELL. I tried to think it was normal, but I knew something was up. Little did I know it was the start of something that I would slowly come to realize was part of my reality. It was my penance after coming off another celebratory binge. This reaction slowly progressed over the last two years of college.

The first time I ever noticed that I had the shakes and didn't attribute it to lack of food was in 2000, my sophomore year of college...not even twenty-one years old. I was trying to fix a tangled cassette. Unfortunately, my hand was vibrating, so I gave myself some wine and was able to enjoy the tape along with the rest of the wine, after both problems were 'fixed.' Buzzed and horrified, I called my brother and recounted to him what had happened as if I'd just had my first wet dream or some other eventual rite of passage to manhood. Unsurprised, if I remember, I think he more or less welcomed me to the club or alluded to the idea of 'Where have you been?' That made me feel better as did the rest of the boxed wine, but the progression has proved to be a nightmare.

I made it through college just fine and, from what I remember, it was the time of my life. I have a lot of really screwed-up pictures, a black book, and valuable friendships to prove it. I became very disheartened with my difficult routine by the end, though. My senior year was awfully tough. Getting blitzed every weekend was amazing and coming back to the dorms on campus was always an interesting disaster.

I used to tell people, the few who understood, how my ridiculous schedule went:

SCHIZOPHRENIC MONDAY:

Inferior to myself, no schoolwork, too preoccupied and on edge...easily startled by common things, vulnerable, and self esteem at negative ten.

WORRY TUESDAY:

Still fevering, thinking of how I am gonna magically execute all that reading, classes, papers, exams—brilliantly done in the end, I must add.

WHATEVER WEDNESDAY:

How much I really drank last weekend=how I function this day.

PRODUCTIVE THURSDAY:

Back on track and kicking ass, do it all, I AM school.

FUCKING FRIDAY:

Sense of humor fully restored, all energy and in gear...just in time to start the cycle all over again...pattern here??????????????

This gave me about two or three days of productivity. So on Fridays I would delve into bliss, oblivion, carelessness, and a state of being that defied concern; one that was mostly impossible for the average student or peer. Satisfactorily saturated, self-sufficient and in need of nothing more than my friends and my cheap booze (211, 40s, ice beers, and maybe some high class malt liquor); I was set. I would drink the empties of all the leftover beers (wounded soldiers) people left (the ones who probably went home early) and I'd wonder, 'What was their problem?' Well, whatever those 'normal' people did, they didn't seem to catch 'my' disease. It must be something towards the bottom of the bottle that did it. Anyway, I had the best of times. Simplicity—lots of rocking music, drinking games, and companionship. Done deal. No bars or girl chasing, just laughs, craziness and comfort. Where was the problem? [See SCHIZOPHRENIC MONDAY]

At this point in my life, I'm not sure if this is a disease or not [it is]. I chose it and loved it. If I choose to drink like I did before, the symptoms that ensue are surely my fault. I am simply struggling with the aftermath of the next good time that I want to have. Why does detox have to exist and be sooooo painful, making one struggle to talk, and even lose his sense of humor? These are the functions alcohol usually eases for people, now the results are the opposite. It has me totally puzzled and unsure how to explain it, mainly to the ones I care about, and also the ones who may be alcoholics, too.

After I graduated from college the summer of 2002, I moved

up to Seattle to live with some old friends from high school. To save words, I again put into action what I did best. I drank—almost every day. No more school, a bad job market, and man, it was perfect. Even better, there were World Cup Soccer matches on TV every night to keep me wasted until five in the morning. GOOAAALLL!!!!

Eventually I started landscaping and I still went hard every night, partying. It didn't seem to matter. I woke up with vigor and readiness. I packed my lunch, and then would get stuck in traffic with my music and a cigarette knowing that I could work, get money, and go home to good friends and drinks. And those were my summer weekdays. The weekends were ten times better with girls and parties, concerts or occasional visits to Olympia. There wasn't a care in the world, and I never had to come down.

Sometimes I would start to come down—maybe I didn't drink much the night before or had an appointment or family dinner—I snuck by without drinking or even nursing a few down and I'd start slipping into a DT [a delirium tremen; a severe type of withdrawal]. In these moments, with a wet and hot/cold forehead, I'd find it difficult to focus on the task at hand, like remembering that I was supposed to bring something to the car or not knowing what I had just talked about with someone for ten minutes. My inability to recall details was very annoying and, the further into withdrawal I would get, the more frustrations turned into fears, anxieties, loss of confidence and purpose, and even worse, a disappearing sense of humor. These are the kinds of shit that compose your personality and when they suddenly start to change or disappear it is freaky and no fun. It seems totally beyond control—purely physical.

The summer ended with the whole crew of friends seeming to have graduated, changed locations, or split up to travel or whatever. I had signed myself up to go with the U.S. Government for two years, hopefully to South America. It was not to fight in the armed forces but to serve as a volunteer. This gave me several months to kill, and I would almost literally do this.

I spent the better part of September and October of 2002 in Las Vegas, and at times on road trips to the coast—mainly to touch base with all my study buddies, right? My biggest plan was

to spend time with my two brothers who worked in Vegas and visit friends in San Diego. I have tried to recount and distinguish the nights and different trips to San Diego and it is almost impossible. Invariably we had a blast and I was losing great chunks of each night, either corresponding to a.) how much fun we had or b.) how much of a jackass I (Poren) 'may' have been.

I drank every night in Vegas, too. It was great. We raged through the casinos, walked down the crowded strip with our sleazy malt liquors and cheap half-racks, almost rubbing in the fact that we could do such a thing in front of such 'classy' gambling folks. On our better nights, we would then find ourselves at the trashy Gold Spike Casino, giggling and doing penny slots super early in the morning. Luckily, we knew gambling was another issue we didn't need. Besides, every time you give the Seven-Eleven cashier 99 cents, you know you get a tall can of 24-ounce Steel Reserve or malt liquor that'll get you just that much more intoxicated. Where's the gamble in that?

Eventually, I went down to Oaxaca, Mexico to study Spanish in preparation for my upcoming service in South America. Upon arrival, I was met with the harshest of withdrawals, which magnified everything that I have previously described. I spent two solid nights in hotels, only going out to find water and a banana, hoping not to be noticed or to have to talk while aiming to remember where my room was with all my stuff. After those two days I proceeded to 'recover'—a valued word for this topic—and basically stayed away from alcohol all but two or three times in six weeks. The clarity was quick in coming, comforting and surprisingly easy. But still, I knew my reality was scary.

From this point on, I think something hit me and began telling me 'I can never, at least physically, go back to the way it was.' I knew that, not just monetarily, but physically, I would pay for every drink or intoxicatingly good time I would have. Meeting my family for Christmas in Mexico after eight weeks of language class (and some travel with a few slip-ups, we'll say) was perfect—a chance to say good-bye before leaving for two years. I showed up sober and beyond any chance of withdrawal. My bro's pulled in from Vegas with carry-on bags under their eyes and the scent of a great night on their breath. I was amazed and jealous at the

same time. But they didn't seem in too bad of shape. How? I couldn't have done that.

The first two days or so with the family were great. I remember sitting with one of my brothers at a table during sunset watching my uncle and cousins surf fishing in the shallow waves. We were talking, smiling, sharing a beer, and savoring a perfect moment. How things should be.

How could the situation change?

"Paging Doctor Toren Volkmann, please report to your own personal disaster called Alcoholism—the tremors, sweats, and antisocial symptoms will be right with you."

Sure enough, after a few hard drinks (tequila that tasted like it had been made in a bathtub), the process began to start—paranoid, confused, intoxicated *me* showed up, tetering on the edge of withdrawal. This side of detox is the one that turns a regular conversation into a task, even if it is with the closest of friends, it doesn't matter. Although they might not notice, inside me is another whole world of pain. The anxiety and difficulty that exists depends on the level of alcohol—alcohol either previously consumed or alcohol in deficit.

After Mexico, I had one last stint in San Diego before my final good-bye with my brothers in Las Vegas. I don't remember shit for the most part and even skipped out on seeing some of my most important friends because I was too gone to really care or make an effort to contact some of them. As it turned out, thanks to a stolen disposable camera and Satan himself, some pictures revealed that I did actually see a few of them. Silly ol' me.

That last morning in San Diego I found myself driving to Vegas in a borrowed car with a gal I didn't know too well. We stopped once, and talked about the same number of times. Although sleepless, I knew that my good old withdrawals wouldn't let me relax so I was confident I would not fall asleep at the wheel. I even let the same CD repeat over and over because I felt too sick and stupid to suggest that we put in another.

The more days in a row I would drink, the more easily these symptoms would surface, and the more intensely they hindered my normal relaxed style of thinking and way of interacting with others. It really started to steal my enthusiasm, my aura, and my

soul. I probably could have looked into a mirror and seen the back wall at times, things seemed so bad. This was not the life I'd ordered.

During my final Las Vegas days, I kept a steady supply in me and generally had a good time. Previous months studying in Mexico had made me realize that my drinking situation was worse than I thought. Drinking now emerged as both my solution and my problem. In opportune moments I think I tried to hint to both my brothers that I was bothered by some of the shit that 'it' was doing to me—they're my fucking brothers! They know what 'it' is and what I'm talking about. But maybe they didn't...What I was trying to tell them surely didn't really come out clearly. In fact, nothing came out conclusively because I didn't want to say it. If the first step to beating the problem is admitting it or accepting it, I guess I just didn't want to beat anything quite yet. Why the hell did it have to be so bad all of the sudden?

Leaving Las Vegas was maybe the low point to this day, [interjection: things did get lower since writing this] in my new 'dialogue' with alcohol. On the floor that last morning, I woke up all too early—which often happens when the body starts losing its normal equilibrium of alcohol—lying next to a girl I really cared for. We may have actually had sex the previous night (if I could only piece together a few simple clues with some certainty.) The fact is that I totally slept with her, we knew I was leaving for two years, and she wanted to talk about it. Experiencing withdrawals, uncomfortable and unable to sleep, I tried to act asleep to avoid the whole situation which should have been a memorable good-bye. I didn't know what the hell to say and I felt like crap. It only made me feel worse hiding my problem from her and sweating out the hours that should have been shared between friends.

With few hours left in Vegas, my problem was worsening without drinks, and I had to tear down whatever I wanted from our tastelessly covered walls and pack for my departure and upcoming disappearance. Good-byes are always difficult but what ensued was terrible. I look back on it with sadness and regret. I tried but couldn't even smile or appreciate our final moments, or express the joy, the love I had for my brothers and my friends. I was too lost in fevers, trembles, and general ineptness, and I felt

like they all could see right through it. I was out of my mind. I was scared to leave, and scared of what was happening inside me. It was killing me and was all wrong for no reason; life is supposed to be great.

Eventually, I boarded a plane home to Seattle, my body in pain, shaking, and my legs aching. Behind me, all the way, a baby shrieked as if to express my exact state of being while magnifying it at the same time. I could barely tolerate to sit, stand, think—live. My mom picked me up at the airport and I played it off legit. It was a tough ride home, trying to read letters about my Peace Corps assignment in South America, making normal conversation that made no sense to me, only wanting to disappear.

I had two days to ‘relax’ and a night of non-sleep, like so many previous nights during those wild Seattle summers, before the symptoms slowly subsided. I didn’t even try to start packing for South America, knowing any brainless attempt would just provoke sweaty confusion and stress. I was worthless. I could barely explain pictures of my trip to Mexico to my parents because I was still so affected by the recovery from that latest binge I had put myself through. Why was it so hard? Was this really necessary?

In my hometown in early January 2003, with a bit more time before leaving, I wiggled my way out of seeing most of my old high school friends and drinking buddies. I wanted to be sane in my final days before departing for the Peace Corps in order to prepare myself. Yes, by then I had learned what happens when I drink, but it wasn’t over yet. Being sober, I was able to find myself and deal with my rational fears of leaving the country for two years with logic and confidence in myself. But departing to another continent by no means left my problem behind.

The question is: What do I do now? How can I make this work? What I can’t help but wonder is whether all those famous [dead] rock stars, winos on the streets, or some of my best friends have experienced these types of things or are experiencing them now? Maybe they just never said so or aren’t admitting it. Maybe what I experience is much different from others. But I can’t imagine anyone bearing the internal hell that I feel as a result of hard drinking and continuing on without letting others know. How did I not ever

hear about this side of alcohol and withdrawal? For me, the silence is over and it is time to start looking for answers. I am also looking for the right cliché to end this—Bottoms up!!

Originally written: 5-21-03 South America

Updated: 9-23-03 Washington DC