


# BLACKOUT TO BLESSING

A glowing staircase with approximately 15 steps leads upwards from a dark base to a bright, rectangular light source at the top. The background is a dark, deep blue with a subtle, starry or nebula-like texture, suggesting a cosmic or spiritual journey.

How the Perfect Love of Jesus  
Saved Me From the Highway to Hell

MELISSA HURAY

*Please enjoy this book sample.*

# BLACKOUT *to* BLESSING

by Melissa Huray

Foreword By Mike Lindell

All events in this book are based mostly upon true events from the author's best recollections of the past and may differ from others' memories of those events. The timing and specific details of some events may have changed and other details may have been added to supplement the storyline. While the events in the book are closely based upon the author's true experiences, many names and other identifying aspects have been changed.

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*“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”*

Isaiah 61:1-3

*“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”*

Isaiah 43:18-19

“Something supernatural happens when you share the gospel.”

–Pastor Mark Olson

*Prologue*  
*Summertime 1998*

Weak gray light filtering through the twisted mini blinds roused me from a drunken stupor. My roommate's crafty ways had created a Martha Stewart-esque atmosphere for our dumpy ground-floor apartment, but the tweaker blinds somehow escaped her renovation. Eye level with the yellow shag carpeting, staggering dread blasted in like a runaway train as I struggled from the floor, cradling my splitting head.

The morning felt perilous.

With my sweaty hair and tumbling mind, I was a wreck. Shaky and dehydrated, mass quantities of liquid were needed, stat.

Stumbling to the fridge for a pitcher of Kool-Aid, I gulped it with reckless need as the door gaped open. The red juice falling in rivulets from the corners of my mouth and spattering the floor was a very low priority. Another morning after had broken and I was just trying to survive.

Though I ached to recreate the blank slate the previous night had left behind, my memories had halted at late afternoon. Hard drinking at a shady tavern in Oliver, Wisconsin set the stage for a giant cavern between a simple tequila shooter and my present reality.

How did the night end? The outing at the railroad bar began midafternoon, but home would elude me for many hours. Countless mornings broke this way—frantic, panicked fumbling for snapshot clips of recollection through a head throbbing from last night's booze.

Cobbling together available facts, red satin shorts came to mind and I saw myself in the Budweiser mirror above the bar, tanned legs crossed, peek of cleavage from my V-necked t-shirt, my face a disinterested smirk. The

appreciative glances gained from nearby patrons suggested I was an exquisite jewel rarely unearthed in Oliver, Wisconsin. Self-delusion ruled me while I racked up an impressive collection of empty bottles to mark my spot at the bar, amber glass sad when empty, but alcohol shooters soon brought new life to the party. Content to just peel silver labels while I waited for what was coming, I folded the thin, curly papers into sloppy origami to pass time. The jukebox looped Bob Seger, Steve Miller, and Lynyrd Skynyrd, drowning out the thud of the longneck making sickening contact with my front teeth while bar trivia and Name that Tune provided just enough mental distraction. Older adults were always surprised by my vast musical knowledge.

“Bet ya can’t guess this one.”

An old guy in a leather biker jacket called as he swaggered back from plugging coins into the jukebox.

C’mon. Give me a challenge.

“Mungo Jerry. ‘In the Summertime.’ Say around 1970? Before I came along, anyway.”

I lifted my beer bottle with a wink, wondering if I had evolved into one of them. Smug approval but no words from the Harley guy. Temporary chums, but I wasn’t out of the woods yet.

Someone a little more my type had snagged a nearby stool, so far generating only bits of banal conversation. Without warning, he plunged into a spirited discussion about 12-step groups.

“It helped me not get so trashed all the time,” he concluded, gesturing for the bartender.

I pondered recovery groups and my limited knowledge of them. The sober scene was as distant as the dark side of the moon, but I tried to connect.

“My Dad went through AA. Like back when I was in high school. I don’t remember much about it, other than him always wanting near-beer afterward.”

I stared at my foot, bouncing along the baseboard of the bar, grimy toes poking out from my black flip-flops to illustrate the determination of a long walk. It was unlikely the guy was focused on my feet.

“Near-beer was like a gateway drug for him,” I continued, coaxing the conversation along. “Next step was always the real thing. And I don’t mean sodie-pop.”

He offered a small chuckle, but forging a serious connection was a challenge. We continued sipping beer in tandem as I bided my time, coming into myself.

Frequenting bars alone was tantalizing. The possibilities of the night ahead swelled in the quiet space between us. The fabric of the anonymous culture was enticing, and I was a wayward traveler stepping into a screenplay with an unknown ending. My sweaty trek to the tavern had earned an afternoon of adult beverages without fear of police or the need to conduct a vehicle rescue mission the following day. Time to rationalize my way right into a blackout.

The bar stool would be mine for the next several hours—my objective (whether I admitted it or not): to earn the attention of an attractive stranger. This desperate quest would dominate unless something very compelling intervened – like a natural disaster, loss of power, or some other antic that resulted in my eviction from the bar. Occasionally, a passing train broke the atmosphere of apathy with a cloud of dust blasting through the doorway like free entertainment. My bemusement was lost on the regulars who simply continued their placid swilling like a row of comfortable but unchallenged cattle. Railroad dregs were nothing new to them.

My latest admirer was a bar regular living in the nearby town of Oliver—a crusty little village reduced to a population of 412 souls off Highway 105 - offering only a dilapidated old schoolhouse, a general store, a vacant church, and most notably to me, the dying tavern. The watering hole near the tracks serviced local laborers along with an occasional passerby.

My local boy drinking buddy was nicely offering a sort of preauthorization into the Oliver scene. Chatting idly with increased flirtation as the night wore on, soon I'd stop remembering. Did we leave together? That very question would be agonizing later, but history indicated the mysterious stranger had been the only reason I gave up my bar stool.

The evening evaporated as unlimited drinks propelled time forward, the clock hours disappearing with the beers. Moments eroded comfortably, and no judgements existed inside the bubble of the bar. Each trip to the jukebox felt like an important assignment. Other patrons were counting on me.

WE WILL REFUSE SERVICE TO ANYONE WHO APPEARS TO BE UNDER THE AGE OF 40 screamed pointlessly from above the doorway—ineffectual considering a group of kids gathered at the back playing pinball beneath a sign blaring HANG LOOSE. The peculiar wall hanging looked like it had come from a garage sale and displayed a half-naked neon lady flickering blandly to the beat of the jukebox, her outline a coconut bra and grass skirt. The kids weren't drinking. Their presence had to do with some Wisconsin tavern exemption.

The blinding day just outside the doorway made afternoon drunkenness awfully hypocritical. Like a scratched piece of vinyl jammed in the jukebox, I begged the same question of my male friend: What's your name? Getting a true read on him was tough. Like shattered glass, his pale blue eyes darted from my face to my shorts to the clock—then back to his beer. He'd probably answered my question sixteen times already.

Close to the point of final recall—I evaluated my reflection once again—this time in the bathroom mirror. Red V-neck T-shirt, red satin shorts, tanned legs. The looking glass offered validation one last time.

A shot of tequila now marked my place, glinting pale orange in the half-light from the open door. My new friend had supplied it, and was coyly searching me for a reaction. I just smiled, made a hat-tipping gesture, and flipped the drink neatly down my throat.



It was just five o'clock now, but I had gone dark.

Oh no, I wasn't sleeping or passed out. I was walking, talking, and functioning. The difference between me and typical partiers, was that my autopilot actions hid my absent memory. So much time unfolded after that last tequila shot, hours filled with God only knows what. When did I leave? How did I make it home? What had we done?

The most reasonable conclusion became clear later: my acquaintance and I migrated from Oliver to downtown Superior and closed down the strip, although I may as well have started a colony on Venus. With just shreds to work with, I pressed my roommate for information the following day. Recreating the night was a delicate balancing act of soliciting information while concealing my functional blackout. History suggested I'd held a complex and detailed conversation with her when I finally stumbled home, but I could easily cover my tracks. I was an expert faker.

Alcohol would be my ruin, that much was clear from the very first taste. Booze caused a horrific chemical reaction in both brain and body, but that didn't stop my quest for constant numbing. Shocking impulsivity, loss of control, and disabling blackouts punctuated every binge, but I couldn't escape the compulsion to capture one more night outside of myself.

Anna wasn't one to judge; my roommate enjoyed tipping back a few cocktails herself and had no real experience with blackouts. In her eyes, I was nothing more than a garden variety partier. Being the only available witness, she was the key to reconciling my erased evening.

"How ya feeling today?" Anna asked with a small but nonjudgmental smirk.

"Not too bad," I responded shortly, watching with careful eyes and hoping my sheepish shrug was convincing. I was most certainly not fine, perilously close to vomiting, and dragging around a head that felt like a thousand pound rotten melon left in the path of an eighteen-wheeler.

Rummaging through the refrigerator, Anna side-stepped the puddle of Kool-Aid without comment—a good sign.

“Any Taco Bell left from last night? Oh, and that guy who brought you home ... Where does he live again?”

Chatting over tacos?

“Oliver,” I managed.

As Anna skillfully peeled a burrito from its soggy paper, I gently pressed for facts. “So, I just fell asleep then? After he left?”

“Not exactly,” she chuckled, chewing. “He took off, and you watched Billy Madison for like the fiftieth time! You were laughing your butt off, remember? How come you never get sick of that movie? I don’t even think it’s that funny.”

Faint with relief, I discovered the tape still loaded in the VCR. Anna spoke the truth. Though I remembered nothing, an unconvincing nod helped.

“Ah, that’s right.”

The shred of closure was comforting, but I continued to obsess about the Oliver bar guy with the pale blue eyes. Where had we gone? What had we done? The fact that I had been awake but not forming memories was disturbing, but that secret was locked up in my very own brain. I am okay.

Shifting to my roommate’s on-again/off-again relationship was a handy way to change the subject.

“What’s going on with you and Mike these days?”

Anna and Mike Huray had been high school steadies, an innocent partnership she’d tried unsuccessfully to drag into their twenties. I knew of Mike, but mostly through Anna’s stories. We had met only once—when he showed up to install a shower in the decrepit old bathroom of our duplex. It was

the spring of 1998, and I'd just been introduced to Anna through a mutual acquaintance. She joined me at the Alamo, the name locals dubbed our hell-hole tenement due to its weird, Spanish-style stucco exterior. Nice, stable, orderly, cute—Mike added a functional shower to our old claw foot tub, and spent a few hours demonstrating a commanding mastery of plumbing tools.

“He’s around,” she answered distantly. “We might go see Huey Lewis and the News later on this summer. We’re still friends. It’s better off, I guess.”

Mike was forgotten while Anna and I hosted many parties and wasted countless days baking in tanning beds and reading each other’s fortunes with a deck of tarot cards I’d picked up at a local bookstore. Our nights were spent methodically closing down the mile-long strip of Tower Avenue watering holes.

Our living arrangement lasted six short months, with alcohol birthing volatility and a venomous parting. Drunken nights, parties with strange people, and plenty of scuffles took their toll, and Anna moved out in an ugly showdown. I soldiered on at the Alamo alone, fearful of taking on another roommate.

Running into my archrival was a raw fear of mine for years. We’d had a brutal parting and it was likely that any future contact would be very ugly. We never did see each other again, although we coexisted in a smallish northern Wisconsin town for many years.

God moved her from my life, offering protection from unseen forces. The Bible says: “He moves mountains without their knowing it” (Job 9:5, NIV). The short time we shared the duplex was brief but impactful: my severe binge drinking already way out of control by twenty-five. As I ignorantly slipped deeper into my sinful vices, I didn’t even notice the enemy slithering in beside me. Though I’d moved far away, God still protected me by severing my connection to Anna at just the right time.

But He still had a plan for Mike Huray and me. We’d cross paths again, but not until I’d experienced the worst alcoholic relapse of my life.

## *Chapter One*

Jesus Christ always wanted to be my first love. A familiar and comfortable constant—the idea of God as Master of the Universe ran like an unbreakable thread through every season of my life. Public acceptance of the Savior of the world happened at nine, and John 3:16 became my mantra. But my new-found Christianity was not nurtured, and adolescence brought many false idols to fill my gaping heart wounds. Getting drunk and pleasing the world became my gods.

Though I had the most well-known scripture verse committed to memory, the Bible wasn't compatible with blackouts—and I paid no attention to that dusty old tome when I was busy pleasing the world. Alcohol and amnesia moved the Good Book to the backseat.

August 21, 2003, was another night that never registered. I seemed to be just another imbibor blending in at an outdoor festival, my functional blackout concealed by adept muscle memory. I was no stranger to walking around in a daze, but tonight I would partner with the enemy for his most ruthless attack. Not just a standard “relapse”—that lost night was a culmination of fifteen years spent playing Russian roulette with different flavors of destruction. Each harrowing escapade had quickened this convergence point, and when day broke and I was breathing, I knew another gamble would be fatal.

By the time I was three, I already had acquired a taste for ale. My father was never stingy with it—always happy to share when I crawled up into his big chair for a cuddle. This was bonding time with Dad. My little sips progressed to heftier gulps from his Blatz can, and eventually a few secret swigs from an adult's glass at family gatherings.

Few would peg a harmless little can of beer as a means to ruin. It's just beer. How could that be anyone's drug of choice? It was the 80's – Party Balls graced every bash and wine coolers were king. But routinely

pounding enough brews to stop breathing made blackouts common—and overdose highly possible. Countless occasions of alcohol poisoning could have taken my life many times, but the hand of God intervened.

Grandpa Bob's retirement party featured an unattended keg in the garage and I was a happy hostess, filling bottomless red Solo cups for grownups and sipping from each before adding a final top-off. By age fourteen, I was already on track for an addiction problem.

The wait would soon be over. As freshman year ended, I flung full tilt into the wonderful world of binge drinking—my first experience with true incoherence easily branding my brain with a new battle cry: Get drunk as frequently as possible!

The first blowout was unforgettable, though I still masqueraded as a normal teenager just out of reach. The gaping discrepancy was difficult because a worsening reputation followed each drunk. But gravel pit parties offered relief found in the temporary attention of drunk boys with Ford trucks and low standards. Accepting the new me was a hard pill to swallow, and I sometimes wished to recapture innocent afternoons daydreaming over teen heartthrobs in my bedroom. Ninth grade capped off with a huge drunk fest at a campground – my intoxicated self slinking in and out of tents populated by drunk guys. Fabricated stories of my escapades soon proliferated the school, and although reality was far less salacious than the vicious rumors, my reputation was already shot.

Throughout high school, I managed two selves. Half of me was fascinated by the future and in love with Max Headroom, astronomy, science fiction, and anything “spacey,” driven to succeed and dreaming of a career as an astronaut or English professor. The evil twin, however, guzzled keg beer, coveted an impressive wardrobe of heavy metal T-shirts, and skipped class to smoke borrowed Marlboro Reds behind the Proctor 7-Eleven—though I didn't really like smoking and the taste made me gag.

Ecstatic to earn a spot on the basketball cheerleading squad my junior year, I'd worked doggedly to get myself (almost) down into the splits, but pretty soon my new position would be soiled. Sneaking sips of root beer schnapps between drills caused chronic lateness, and the coach glowered while pointing out the sloppy threads hanging from the hem of my skirt. Two years on the junior varsity swimming team, rigorous practices, and camaraderie with healthy people brought some brief normalcy, but even becoming a spelling and writing prodigy couldn't tame the alcoholic beast inside.

Weekdays had a good girl focus; I was a bookworm pursuing a moral and godly life. But as Friday night approached, ice-cold keg cups captured my thinking. Beer offered freedom and an unsteady gateway to carefree, relaxed, and self-assured adolescence. Four years of high school brought endless aluminum cans and a drunk Melissa who wasn't awkward, anxious, or clumsy—like a superhuman avatar manifesting dreamy events where the quarterback of the football team made me his conquest.

Alcohol's services weren't cheap, though. Short-term relief brought loads of pain and shame—Monday was never far off, and rather than deliver on promises made in the heat of the moment, love interests brushed by in the hallway with their eyes bouncing away in mild disgust.

Brief accolades sometimes followed the weekend parties. “Whoa, I heard that you and Eddie were making out on Friday night! Man! I didn't even know you guys LIKED each other?!”

Eddie? WHO IS EDDIE? Recoiling in shame, I pushed my indiscretions away while striving to prove my party antics isolated events. I vowed to behave better at the next shindig, but Friday just brought more drunken humiliation that seemed fun in the moment.

Sixteen and hell-bent on getting my license, drinking behind the wheel kicked off the very day I conquered the road test—my finest skill soon becoming expert navigation of dirt back roads in Dad's battered green Ford F-150 with a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon between my knees. Why not? Everyone at Proctor High School was doing it. Each weekend brought

another gravel pit, my highest priority being first in line for the keg. Tipsy and teetering on a rusty tailgate before the ruins of a campfire, I gulped from my red Solo cup and took turns on a bottle of whatever was available.

Beer continued to deliver relief to my anxiety-riddled brain. When the parties in the woods dried up, festivities shifted to dilapidated frat houses with rowdy college sophomores, and along with a couple of girlfriends, I became very skilled at finding a few reliable bashes every week. I'd pass as old enough while perched on a burnt orange Goodwill couch with exposed stuffing (no one really cared as long as five dollars had been exchanged for a drink ticket), chattering incessantly with unbelievable hysteria. The precious keg cups worked well for a time: a simple plastic prop sloshing with cheap swill created an illusion far beyond an underage girl out past curfew.

I didn't come with an alcohol "off" switch. Though my friends were also experimenting with drinking, they didn't lose their wits and still watched the clock to make curfew. Not me. The morning after was never a concern.

Sometimes a worried friend wrestled my blessed beverages away while I violently protested. You've had enough. God saved me from alcohol poisoning countless times—passing out meant I was forced to stop searching for my next beer.

The harrowing mornings-after were excruciating: a stinky, dirty, frat house reeking of stale beer waited at daybreak. I was the last straggler clamoring to reconcile the madness of the lost night.

Once, I woke in a bean bag chair with my Girbaud jeans completely soaked to the knees with urine. This wasn't unusual or rare. In the blinding light of day, the ease of the endless kegs and the chatter of boys was gone, and I was left with soaking wet pants and panic. I never went home last night.

Through fifteen years of escalating blackouts and countless attempts at controlled drinking, I'd been married and divorced—and shared an eight-year-old daughter with my ex-husband. By the summer of 2003, I found myself bottomed out once again and had cobbled together forty-nine alcohol-free days. I'd made it eighteen months a few years back, but only through fear of jail. Unbearable self-hatred was my current motivation.

By late August, the forty-nine precious days I'd banked were in serious jeopardy as racing thoughts ached to recapture my old life. I never drank daily. I always had a job and car—I was functional.

At thirty years old, I seemed healthy and looked fine on the outside.

But control never lasted beyond a few days. The innocent act of cracking a beer on a hot summer day lit the fuse for another desperate attempt at responsible drinking, at least the happy and cheerful scene unfolding in my mind's eye thought I could do it. Merry laughter and casual beer sipping on a rooftop patio with an attentive male companion faithfully produced a head-shattering hangover and horrific regret every single time. The first heavenly sip brought nothing but disaster.

Living in the public eye made drinking binges risky escapades ripe with irrational fear—mostly about viewers recognizing me while out on a bender. Getting fired would've been crippling—my position as a small market news anchor at KDLH-TV in Duluth provided a flimsy sense of identity and reluctant permission for my existence.

My career at the station started with promise in 1999. Two DUI arrests the year I was hired had initiated my longest period of sobriety ever—and though the production department job paid peanuts, it brought redemption through ego boosting. Joining a real TV station and rubbing elbows with local celebrities, like lead reporter Lance Carter, seemed a harbinger of incredible promise.

Lance was so untouchable. Hovering far removed from the talent in my tiny teleprompter room overlooking the set, I could privately watch him in all his glory—preening before going live. After feathering his light brown hair, he smoothed his slim-cut suit and straightened his tie, then steeled his eyes for the camera. I felt so unworthy in his presence, I couldn't manage to say hello for a year.

But eventually, I did. Up close, Lance's trademark good looks told a different story—cheeks blooming with rosacea and masked by makeup, concealer streaks a dead giveaway. Perhaps he wasn't so pristine? Maybe no one was,



not even TV people. After chatting about my news interests, Lance himself suggested I “put myself out there” and pursue reporting. Huh? Me? I had a sudden urge to turn and see if he was speaking to someone else. Those offhanded words of encouragement became a tiny flame directing me behind the very cameras I thought were reserved only for gifted and beautiful people.

An internship soon opened, and I hustled and made an impression. Booze flowed post-newscast, and I quickly locked step with other abusers in the world of broadcasting. Grinding it out over a couple of years eventually earned a reporting spot and ultimately a weekend anchor position, as well as notoriety as a local celebrity. When people at stores or restaurants approached with, “Hey, you’re on the news,” satisfaction filled me, the words of admiring strangers a healing balm for my frail identity.

Determined to prove my worth as a news professional, the straight life endured for a time, but I soon craved a trip back to the dark side. By August 21st of 2003, the hard-earned sober days hung in jeopardy—my AA sponsor an ornate shelf ornament I liked the idea of having but easily overlooked.

My commitment to sobriety splintered as I finalized plans for the Minnesota State Fair—while deciding my sponsor’s dark warnings to avoid “people, places, and things” were antiquated sentiments in dreadful need of a twenty-first century update. Drinking battered the periphery of my thoughts like a lonely traveler wanting refuge from a storm, seeking the warm glow of an open tavern. The fair beckoned like a private island I might visit and then abandon without baggage, leaving all indiscretions behind. I could drink once more, and build back the days before I had to tell anyone!

Why not Beck? I’d taken a break from the constant tug-of-war that never left my thoughts to entertain our road trip that day. Beck Strickland was joining me - a burly laborer and close friend of my landlord Gerard. We were both single and Gerard was forever trying to play matchmaker. Beck was a fixture at the duplex I rented, stopping by for beers sometimes. In fact, we’d been reacquainted the previous day at Gerard’s birthday bash.

Beck had seemed excited about another date, but would likely become just another casualty of my trauma-based courting habits. I'd never dated anyone without a hidden agenda – either to be kindred party animals with no attachments, or to mold into husband material – no in-between. My alcohol addiction made healthy and stable relationships impossible, and it also trashed my body and health goals. In fact, drinking had a tremendous effect on my weight and the depression that came with it. The pounds had been racking up for the past two decades—starting back when my mother introduced me to the marigold Sunbeam scale under the bathroom sink. Prior to ten I'd been a normal-sized kid, but long afternoons alone after school had jump-started a pattern of raiding the cupboards to soothe anxiety. The television set and bottomless bags of Old Dutch potato chips offered predictable numbing. The Electric Company, The Jeffersons, and People's Court were my babysitters—the grating but predictable laugh track and droning sounds of Judge Wapner reliable companions every afternoon.

As my weight trended upward, eighth grade brought hardcore crash dieting. Chronic binge drinking took over a year later—and any hope of scale stability crumbled. Alcohol never offered any favors with the hateful, bright yellow weighing device and brought on wild mood swings—ecstatic days where the needle dipped below 110, and intense crying jags brought on by numbers bouncing into the 180s.

As my twenties drew to a close, cravings for fried food and endless beer pitchers made sticking to a diet plan impossible. Several mornings a week, I'd be locked in the McDonald's drive-thru near my apartment – patiently inching toward the window for a bag of grease. My thighs were irrelevant when saddled with a crushing hangover.

As I left my West Duluth duplex that sticky August day fair-bound, the scale wasn't my friend—the devil's platform had greeted me earlier with a reading of 158 pounds. For someone just 5'3", chalking it all up to thickness was becoming a tough sell. A trip to the neighborhood K-Mart store scored some new stretchy stone-washed shorts, and nonstop visits to the tanning bed were useless bids to distract people from my growing size.

Blindsided by an intense desire to drink, I paused to grip the kitchen counter while a powerful craving swept through like a hot river of blood, making my head throb. Not right now. But what could take its place? Food, spending? Maybe an energy drink?

No booze now. I'd wrestle with the thought again later. I had nothing in my stash and no time to score before hitting the road. Maybe I'd grab a coffee once we were on the road.

Beck was waiting on the porch as I rolled up to his tattered pink farmhouse. Offering a mock salute, he ambled down the sidewalk as I moved junk from the passenger seat. Watching him fold his thick frame into my compact car, I considered the two of us sharing a family life with children and a backyard sandbox. Maybe in this farmhouse? I could transform it into something shabby chic, peruse garage sales for antiques and refurbish them. The home would sparkle with a woman's touch, and at night when the kids were sleeping, we'd swing on the porch under the stars and knock back a few cocktails. Why not? My brother was able to, often enjoying a beer at a family party and forgetting his can while he tossed a football for one of the kids. I'd never lose track of an open beer. Once cracked, the taste and special burn were on my mind in sixteen different ways: how can I sip this so people don't think I am a lush? Why is everyone else drinking so slow? How many beers are left in the case? When does the liquor store close? Maybe I just won't go to bed tonight, that way I won't need to wake up tomorrow.

My efforts to weave booze with life harmlessly had been dismal failures—because the liquor always won, smothering and choking out every competitor. It needed to be in first place.

Smiling in spite of myself as Beck managed to tuck himself between the seat and the dashboard, I was silent as he closed the door apologetically. There was nothing wrong with this pleasant, harmless guy, he'd be a good man to some woman out there. Now I wondered: How would we keep a conversation going without alcohol? Chatting sober-style all the way to St. Paul was a paralyzing reality—and now drinking felt like a requirement. The mental wrangling raged as we merged onto the freeway heading south.

Beck wore a grizzly goatee flecked with a little gray, and although his frame carried more weight than it had in his military prime, he was still strong and somewhat fit. His faded NASCAR T-shirt and Checker Auto Parts baseball hat revealed not only his interests, but also total relaxation with himself. Gazing agreeably out the window, he made small talk. How's work been going? I saw your story on the city council. What's the mayor like in person?

My short responses weren't the slightest bit relaxed or subtle. I'd dusted my face with glitter and donned gaudy rhinestone sunglasses, with the perfectly manicured acrylic nail tips I really couldn't afford screaming, Look at me! Someone, anyone! Finding attention wasn't a problem these days—my drinking behaviors ensured I'd get noticed. Blending in with others was a thing of the distant past. Beck hadn't yet witnessed my dramatic progression, but he was about to get a whopper of a wake-up call.

Rolling down the interstate, the persistent idea of a social cocktail returned and this time I let it stay. I-35 stretched out, void of emotion or opinion.

"Beck, I'm an alcoholic," I blurted out as we passed Moose Lake. His reaction would determine my next move.

"What? I've seen you drink...alcoholic? Come on. There's nothing wrong with you."

His reassuring smile was awfully convincing.

"What about the drunk driving?" Still unsettled. Convince me!

"So? That was years ago, wasn't it? I got busted twice when I was in the Navy. Lots of people do."

"But how do you control your drinking?" My sanity teetered on his response.

Beck stared out the window in contemplation as though I was asking him to explain something very technical, like a bear market or the particles of an atom.

“I grew out of it,” he finally decided. “I stop before I get too messed up. I just got tired of having too much, I guess.”

His assessment of controlled drinking was brilliantly illuminating, making the elusive concept seem finally within reach. Maybe this time drinking could work. Alcohol and me, one last time. A guiltless drink.

“Have a few beers, it’s cool. I’ll keep an eye on ya.”

Simple as taking out the trash. Beck smiled and flashed a flirty wink. With his approval, a flood of anticipation came. It was okay.

As Beck sang along to a Winger song, I retreated into my mind, pondering, strategizing. Should I? No one would know. My buddy would surely supervise. We passed the town of Sandstone, and his promise of protection sealed the deal.

I’m going to do it.

That little switch of resolution flipped and once I’d slipped from white-knuckling to “Oh well, screw it,” the obsession to begin again left me completely magnetized for liquor. Faking apathy like a pro allowed Beck to miss the gravity of the situation. I’d do it fast, dump it down my throat before anyone could intervene.

We finally made it to St. Paul, worked our way through the fairground gates, and parked. Three hours south of Lake Superior, the temperatures were appallingly hot. The entrance to the event was a confusing mess I wanted to demolish, hoping beer would break into view. My first trip to the famed Minnesota State Fair wasn’t making an impression so far—I could’ve just as easily been on Mars. Alcohol dominated every thought.

Beck and I were still empty-handed after an hour of aimless wandering. Pausing to tie my sweatshirt around my waist, my pathetic whining would’ve rivaled that of a five-year-old begging for ice cream. Where was the beer? No one was even drinking!

Up ahead, the street sloped into a sea of bodies moving in unison,

parents pushing strollers and passively guiding toddlers as they licked rainbow colored sno-cones. No beer. Oh Lord, what if there wasn't any? The thought of abandoning my mission was crippling, and panic escalated as we pressed on through the crowds.

“World-famous cheese curds,” Beck pointed to a fluorescent orange stand hawking chunks of deep-fried cheese. “Are you hungry?”

“No, not really,” I mumbled distractedly. I couldn't ruin the buzz already brewing in my brain.

Working our way through a steamy pole barn choked with people pondering goods and gadgets, I sidestepped them politely but inside wished for a bulldozer. Why were they milling about like cattle when beer was available? I was sad and sorry for them, placidly fingering oven mitts from Ely and holding up jars of blackberry jam someone had spent hours canning. While they wasted time haggling over Joe Blow's homemade granola, I was going to get drunk. Too bad for them.

Suddenly, it crushed me. I couldn't stop now if my life depended upon it. Scoring a drink was challenging, but I was willing to do anything for it. Sickening fear swept in as I was overcome by alcohol - my reigning king - and its inescapable power. Once I started, all control would be lost. The sudden revelation of my unstoppable pursuit of total obliteration punched me in the stomach with a terrific force. I almost changed my mind.

Emerging from the barn and into the hot sun, I drew in a huge breath of relief. There, not twenty feet ahead, was an oasis—a neon sign that screamed BEER GARDEN.

Beck pointed. “There's the bar. Should we grab a quick one?”

With my raging battle shielded from oh-so-casual Beck, I nodded hypnotically as euphoria escalated. I was going to get drunk. Remaining calm as we shuffled in line, Beck chattered about mundane things like the prices, weather, and crowds while I stood mesmerized by the man

handling the taps. Attempting to smile and fool him into believing I was normal, I wanted to morph into a regular Jill who'd stopped by to wet her whistle. It was so hot. Did my face betray me?

The atmosphere in the beer garden was merry and lovely. Sneaking glances around, I soaked up the easy, animated behavior of people just kicking back with a couple of adult beverages. A group of guys hovering over a pub table caught my attention then. Beck and I weren't exclusive and he wasn't blocking future prospects, but I needed to get a few beers down first.

The boys were full of energy, signaling the server for another round. After a cautious glance, a bright blue polo shirt caught my eye, the oval patch above the breast identifying its owner as a Pool Boy. I instantly liked the cheeky reference enough to overlook the cherubic face and fine copper hair that normally wouldn't have been enticing. Our eyes locked then, and I wondered vaguely if he thought I was fat. My legs boasted a great tan, but the golden-brown shading did little to mask my hefty thighs.

Did he notice? He was husky himself, maybe just slightly chubby, which was fine and accepted for men—though not for me.

Our eyes met as I furtively watched him sip his beer. Easy. Drinking, talking, flirting, no guilt, no remorse, no regret. The magical cocktail of control was so close—and I hadn't abandoned my tireless pursuit of it. Beck ordered two giant beers and passed one over as my sane mind whispered: There's still time to stop yourself.

The devil's loud and persistent mental daggers made the voice of reason slip into the backdrop. Go ahead and do it! No one cares. You can blend right in! Get the sweet relief you crave.

The angel's pleas were much weaker: You know what happened last time! Do you want to throw away more than a month of sobriety? You'll be crazy and out of control and hate yourself tomorrow. Another failure.

The saint turned away because I had reached the point of no return.

I was too far gone for an intervention.

Turning back to the frosty beer in my hand, I revered that red cup of old, knowing just one swallow would vanquish the battle.

DO IT!

The mental assault was silenced as I raised the precious plastic to my mouth and downed a mighty swig before anyone could interrupt. Could they see the struggle within, the battle between good and evil that always took place before I gave in?

The burning gulp flooded my throat, and I was changed, possessed, and fortified. Time stood still with no tomorrow and no consequences.

The relief was instant, the first slug of beer shutting down the fire within and the torturous war of words exchanged between the Holy voice and the enemy. Most of that first jumbo glass disappeared in ten minutes, liquid silk coating my soul with luxurious numbness.

Drinking buddy Beck was much more laid back, having shifted to complacent crowd scanning after only downing a few swigs.

“Guess what? Now that I’ve started drinking, there’s no stopping me now,” I revealed.

“Really?” he responded with great interest. “I could quit and just go watch the show. Doesn’t really matter to me.”

Such a simple guy. Kind, decent, and apparently not addicted.

The Tap Man soon beckoned with another cup of heaven. After lounging at the bar for a while, beer scarcity mode commenced and I began pounding colossal cups like water checkpoints at a marathon. Beck was powerless to moderate me—each time I hit the bathroom I scored another beverage on the return trip.



While swilling bottomless brews in the setting sun, the morning after was an unpleasant nag from the very distant future that the excitement of the fair easily smothered. Outrageous flirting fooled Beck into believing our budding connection may continue beyond this one August night, and I appeared alert and animated. It was an illusion. Beneath the mania, my brain was methodically going to sleep.

As darkness crept in, Beck was forgotten while I flirted with someone at the concession stand. Miles was the guy with the Pool Boy shirt I'd spotted earlier. I soon learned he owned a mobile disc jockey business in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and before long he shared stories of his connections to famous musicians, along with his plan to get backstage that night.

"I'm a TV news reporter and an anchor, so I've met a celebrity or two," I bragged, passing him a business card as proof. "I'm a DJ, too. I've done events for the past ten years."

Miles smiled coyly, possibly doubting my claims.

"Which celebrities?"

Shrugging like it was everyday news, I rattled off a short list.

"Rick Nielsen from Cheap Trick, Eddie Money, Collin Raye ... Jesse Ventura. A bunch of politicians too...you know, with the TV job. Oh yeah, I met the guys from ELO, too." Thinking of the night our paths had crossed at Moondance Jam made me cringe. I'd been extremely drunk, repeating the same question endlessly: "Which one of you is Jeff Lynne?"

Jeff had left years earlier—and not on good terms.

Laughing like a hyena as Miles and I continued getting acquainted, I immensely enjoyed name-dropping and inflating myself for pointless reasons. I didn't realize then I'd been just another drunk small-town media type fawning over the rock stars, convinced I was the hottest thing going. They'd seen it all so many times before. But Miles chuckled, maybe with just a little admiration.

“Can I bum a cigarette?”

Though I wasn't a serious smoker, drinking always produced a powerful and overwhelming urge to light up. Miles sparked a Marlboro Light and passed it over, the gesture somehow seductive. Suddenly remembering Beck, Pool Boy shifted to the back burner as I puffed on the cig and stumbled back to my seat in the grandstand.

“Where have you been?” Beck asked, more amused than anything else.

He wasn't mad. He never got mad.

“Around.”

Melissa had left the building. I was trashed, the gaping mouth of the blackout waiting to swallow me whole.

My next dim recollection transported me to the front of the crowd—facing the band Night Ranger with just a narrow security pit separating us. Apparently, I'd found Miles again, and he did have connections. Drunk on “Sister Christian,” I was primal and impulsive, and beamed right back to 1985.

As though he'd never existed, Beck fell into obscurity as my blackout self took over. She walked for me, talked for me, said things I never would when in my right mind. By the time Boston, the headliners, took the stage, my brain was as desolate as a shuttered city. Pressed against the security barrier, I was close enough to make eye contact with the band members—but I'd never remember it later. The rest of the night was lost.

Twelve hours later, I came to.

Drunk and disoriented in a strange motel room, I hung from the bed, eye level with a cheap marigold bedspread. Someone was talking. Slowly things came into focus as I struggled to weave together the previous night. Where am I? Bits and pieces flooded in at warp speed, but it was as nonsensical as trying to discern shapes through frosted glass. Beck hovered overhead.

“Melissa. Wake up. We have to go. I think your car was towed.”

His face was panicked, not the congenial, up-for-anything Beck I'd grown accustomed to. My car? Where was it? Head pounding, I struggled into a sitting position as the bedspread fell away, revealing my naked body. Stumbling into the tiny bathroom, I slammed the door against Beck's troubled expression.

The old yellow retro tile in the motel john stuck to my bare feet as I crouched on the toilet, cradling my head. What had happened?

My last point of recall was drinking beer, flirting with guys, and waiting for the band. One brief flash of being stage right, but then my memories tumbled into nothingness. How had I left the fun and revelry of the fair only to be beamed to a horrifying place of sickness and emotional ruin? Forty-nine days sober and I'd drunk the madness and insanity back in one superficial evening.

Gingerly guiding a finger along my left side, I winced while wondering if I'd cracked a rib. My right knee throbbed with pain, and the other was capped with an enormous magenta goose egg practically swelling before my eyes.

My battered body was a fitting companion for the rest of the hangover aftermath. Alcohol withdrawal surged in as my heart pounded with a familiar yet exquisitely hideous panic attack. My mind just tumbled over itself as I remained paralyzed, unable to think or talk.

After escaping the bathroom, I gathered my things while Beck summoned a cab. Anchored dumbly in the back of the taxi, I struggled to hold back tears as my partner in crime directed the driver. The beautiful, breezy morning and chatty and cheerful cabbie could not blot out my personal hell. My mind screamed its reckless course of insane thoughts as I sat in miserable silence. Terrified and helpless, I truly wished to die.

Fifteen minutes later, we returned to the fairgrounds. Destination unknown, I couldn't coax my mouth into forming words, I just shuffled behind Beck - speechless and on autopilot - searching for my clean, red Acura.

Walking without purpose, I was still half-drunk, my primary task keeping enough distance behind Beck so I wouldn't have to talk to him. As we roamed the endless parking lots, the drone of lawn mowers and ground workers cleaning up last night's party muffled my choking sobs.

Finally, we reached the impound lot and scraped together thirty bucks to release my car. I'd been choking on my tears for over an hour, but after navigating away from St. Paul onto the straight, emotionless expanse of I-35, an uncontrollable flood of emotion burst forth, with sobs wracking my entire body. Heaving with all the composure of a Raggedy Ann doll, I have never cried so hard in my entire life.

Beck sat speechlessly as I drove. He'd encountered the demon Melissa—the beast birthed by alcohol. Simple, harmless beer at an event that was supposed to be fun provided a gaping hole for the devil to do his work. I couldn't get people to fully understand. They had to see it to believe it.

“Mel, I had no idea you were that bad. I never should have encouraged you to drink.” Beck looked genuinely regretful.

It didn't matter. I knew what I was going to do even before Beck joined the party—he was just another pawn in the enemy's master plan.

As we drove, Beck revealed more about the lost night and shared agonizing things I couldn't remember and didn't want to know. I'd been forced to submit a breath test while leaving the fairgrounds, and the police wanted to transport me to detox. Beck was too distraught to remember the breathalyzer reading: .35? .40? Approaching lethal levels, apparently. Unable to walk, I'd tumbled down the cement grandstand stairs several times, resulting in badly bruised knees and possibly cracked ribs. Did someone slip something into her drink? An incredulous police officer had asked Beck.

My good-natured buddy spared me the deplorable admission to the detox center by assuring the officers he would keep watch—make sure I didn't die and all. Beck's presence likely prevented me from taking off with a nefarious stranger, and served as a barrier between a possibly fatal injury, like splitting my head open on the concrete - instead of just suffering cracked ribs,

bruises, and paralyzing shame. But his services came at a cost. Something had happened between us, something I couldn't remember at all.

Something.

“Mel, I did something I'm not too proud of last night,” Beck began.

I didn't bother looking at him. I knew.

Everything about that morning felt terribly wrong. I began to pray, slowly and methodically. Truly having reached the end of myself, I cried out to God and thoughts of my late father swirled through my head.

I'd been chatting with the Big Guy since I was a small child playing in a large pile of dirt dumped in front of my house for some project I don't think ever happened. He was an inaccessible wizard-like Being way up in the sky then—not yet Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, the Man who'd walked the earth, who'd already borne this day on the cross.

Pain and desperation had driven me to bankruptcy. I stared at my feet and screamed in my mind. Please God, help me! Don't ever let me drink again! I cannot do this alone!

That morning, I laid my addiction at the foot of the cross and I surrendered, although I didn't quite know the enormity—the saving grace—that had met me the moment I sincerely cried out to Him.

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