

## AFTER

I stood at the bar a caterpillar changing colors, shifting dangerously from leaf to leaf, I was inhaling life. The bass line from the band on stage riveted across the floor climbing up my spine. I saw her on the dance floor, her bubble butt moving like two trapped animals beneath her trendy shift. A voice in my head said move and I moved to the pulse of the room, introducing myself with a smile and a name. My smile was met with pursed lips, her moving closer. While she turned her back and lodged her tush against my crotch placing her right hand behind my neck and kissing me. We danced as one. We drank as many. Soon we were a show, the couple beyond inhibitions, dancing what might have been a private act.

I glanced at the bar, an altar of glinting glass and goose necking, reflecting the fantasy I was lost in. Yes me Rowan Marr, writer, living life by the seat of my pants at thirty-two not in my head, fuckers!

She moved her butt in sweet circles against my sex. She turned her face up to me as she felt me come alive. "Chloe" she said pulling my face closer, I thought for a kiss. Chloe bit my lower lip so hard I was certain there would be blood. Only pain, only hunger. She turned and we snapped together like a puzzle, Chloe smelling of whiskey, clove, cigarette and danger.

"You going to ask me what I do?" She smiled at me lamely. I stuttered mentally as she broke into a laugh.

“Am I reading your mind?”

“No, of course not” I answered defensively.

“Then what’s your interest, lad?” she said in a mock pirate voice.

Again I remained wordless simply smiling.

“Is it my ass that got your attention?”

A broader smile being my answer, “OK monkey man, let’s see who you are.”

She led me upstairs to a veranda sparsely populated with sodden millennial’s. Chloe found an isolated corner. She stood with her back in the wedge of the room, unseen but within arms reach. “Now’s your chance”, as she put something in my mouth, I imagined it was a molly and I was right. We kissed passionately, maybe too passionately for public, but my head was swimming with fantasy and I allowed myself to float. I could hear the music from downstairs pulsing through the floor making my body shiver. Chloe’s heat, the moistness of her mouth, the amalgam of scents wafting off her body made me spin. She grabbed my hard penis through my pants.

“Take me home and fuck me till you own me,” she said smiling wickedly, and then jammed her tongue deep into my throat. We waded through the school of fish in designer rags stepping very carefully into the street. My car was in a lot two blocks away. Swaying down the avenue arms locked looking like two kids on an amusement park ride. Chloe pulling me into closed shop entrances and kissed me viciously, pulling my cock out of my pants and putting it in her mouth then would suddenly stop and laugh, as she would amble away.

I started to hallucinate as I watched Chloe walk in colorful time lapse and then spring back to normal. We reached my car. I pulled out of the lot with little difficulty. I thought the way home would be an automatic but then Chloe put her head in my lap and my cock back in her mouth. I didn't know who was driving my car but it wasn't me.

The night was dark and moonless, wet with rain and emotion. My car followed the road like a nose to tail horse ride, till it didn't. I could feel the heat of Chloe's mouth get more intense. Lights flashed by followed by blaring horns as I struggled to keep my eyes on the street. Then all feeling was in my sex, making me close my eyes and roll my head back and surrender, I heard Chloe laugh then everything went black.

Beep...beep...beep... I come to with one eye covered. I'm in a hospital. My leg is in a cast and elevated. I recognize the feeling of opioids wearing off as a young doctor my age enters the room.

"Hello, I'm Peter Warren," he said gravely, "you were delivered to us early this morning in rough shape, your leg is fractured in several places with a number of serious cuts and abrasions but you will recover to normalcy within a reasonable period of time."

I stared at the doctor waiting to wake from this awful dream. He continued but I didn't hear a thing. I looked at my body, I was a fucking mummy. Then Peter Warren leaned in closer to get my attention.

“Your alcohol reading was more than double the limit to drive. An officer will be by shortly to talk to you.”

Making an effort to reach out of this nightmare I asked about Chloe. The physician looked at me, “she didn’t make it” he said with disdain, “that’s what the police need to question you about.”

I rocked back into to the shell of the bed. A policeman will be coming by to charge me with vehicular manslaughter. Jesus Christ! I’ve killed someone. There’s no escape. I’m lying in a hospital bed like a prop for a bad horror movie. Stop. You selfish prick. You killed someone with your social arrogance and now you’re whining about-facing yourself. It’s come to this. Friends, suggestions about taking a break from the booze, stepping away from the club life were swatted away like annoying flies. And this is where your knowing better has brought you. You’re a killer. Fuck! Chloe. I didn’t even know her. She seemed as lost as me, now lost forever.

I looked up from my haze and a nurse told me I needed to rest as she released more opioid from the drip. I soon fell into the rabbit hole of my situation.

In this drug induced dream I’m in a speeding car with no steering wheel with my parent’s in the back seat giving me directions. I let the car steer it self. Suddenly I’m thrown from the auto and tumble into the middle of the road. I see a beautiful naked woman lying in the middle of the highway. I move to her and roll her over; it’s Chloe face distorted with cuts, pieces of glass sparkle from her countenance. She smiles and says, “Fear is an engine, not a brake.” I get up and run down the street

tripping over another body. It's my dad who looks up calmly like he is sleeping in the road and says, "The devil is in the details." I wake in a deep stupor with the nurse trying to control my flailing. Two male nurses hold me down while more drugs are pushed into my body. The last thing I remember is seeing myself in the dream state as a clown looking in the mirror asking, "The pursuit of happiness?" And then I was gone.

Peter Warren stood bedside as I slowly came to. "Can we talk?" I nodded yes vaguely shifting my face in his direction.

"Do you think you have a drinking problem?" My answer less vague,

"Are you sure idiots can be doctors?" He pulled back and still stood his ground.

"I just killed somebody I barely knew. What do you think? A- might have a problem, B- Just normal young man behavior, C- definitely has a problem, D- On his way to hell with a bottle in his hand."

"Well, you're definitely going somewhere and it might seem like hell."

Peter's sober response stilled me.

"I'm not here to persecute you. I'm here to help. Four years ago I found myself in a similar situation. Drinking had become an issue, it punctuated every aspect of my being." He stopped for a moment waiting for my response. I didn't give one. I stared into his face seeing his actual earnestness. He was trying to help me. Why? I'm a selfish prick.

Peter continued, "Like yourself I drove drunk with Lilly, my girlfriend in the car. I was beyond reproach, my friend's asking for the keys, Lilly and I laughing at them like they were over protective parents. We got in my car and sped away. The next thing I remember is waking in the hospital with minor injuries. I asked the doctor, who I knew, if Lilly was all right. I was told she was in critical condition. I was mandated to an alcohol rehab program. Basically, I went to rehab then AA. I was lucky Lilly recovered."

"Oh God! Not that. Sitting in a room with those fucking losers." I blared as Peter stared in disbelief.

"You are a self entitled dick."

"Can doctors talk to patients like that?" I snapped back.

"This doctor can, because I'm trying to save your pathetic life."

I sat silent for several long moments realizing the depth of my predicament.

"You might be attending meetings in prison. There will be no getting around it. In the interim before trial if you start with a program and develop some remorse, it might behoove you when sentencing becomes eminent. At any rate you need to get things in order. You've killed somebody's little girl and you'll need to make amends." Peter left the room.

"Fuck. Her parents. Oh, my God! Save me from this embarrassment." I couldn't think of a worse situation. Moments later, Officer Warren Carpenter, a world-weary man in his forties entered my room, I was wrong.

"I'm sure you know why I'm here."

"I'm a drunk not an moron."

"You're also a wiseass, which isn't going to work in your favor."

"OK. Let's start over."

"You know what you're facing?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, here's the skinny, several years in prison. And ninety AA meetings in ninety days till your trial," as he handed me a booklet to be signed at every meeting. I had no answer. I felt all the emptiness I tried to fill with alcohol and drugs wash over me. I began to weep uncontrollably. I wept for Chloe. I wept for my sorry ass. I wept for my parents and Chloe's parent's who didn't deserve to be put through this trauma. I wept like a child who didn't know better, and I didn't.

I broke from grieve for a moment catching my breath. Officer Carpenter was still standing there.

"Well, that's a start, feeling what you did to other people. How your actions have affected other human beings. Maybe there's a person inside that wiseass?" He left his card on the table and crossed to the door.

"I'll be in touch concerning your trial. Best you take advantage of the help that's available. Take care of yourself."

I sat there in that bed with my mind racing. I can't go to prison. I don't have a choice. It's not like should I go or should I stay. I'm being sent because I took

someone's life with my behavior. And that was the word that stuck in my thoughts. Behavior. I wasn't a person. I was a behavior. I was a series of conditioned reactions geared to get the best deal, manipulate the game. I didn't care about other people's outcome only mine. I thought of an aphorism my dad would spout, "The Lord kicks you in the ass with ever increasing shoe sizes till you get it." The shoe wedged up my ass felt huge and unmovable. I realized I needed help. I had no idea how to be a real person. I was an egomaniac with low self-esteem.

My first AA meeting was in a church two blocks from my apartment. I walked there on my crutches. People at the entrance were warm and welcoming and I was thinking cult all the way. Nobody should be this happy about being an alcoholic. A guy my age named Brian fixed a chair for me so I could elevate my leg. There was a protocol of readings admitting we were all a bunch of fuck ups and if we surrendered to a Higher Power we could find hope and peace. I hated to admit it but hope and peace sounded good, so I listened.

During the meeting people would share amazing episodes of their life and preface it with their name and admitting they were alcoholic. It was astonishing to me for people to be sharing stories similar to mine in public. Then the speaker of the meeting, a middle aged guy named Jerry asked if there were any newcomers, like I didn't stick out with crutches. But to my own astonishment, I raised my hand and heard myself say, "I'm Rowan and I'm an alcoholic."



Jesus fucking Christ what is happening? I sat there. The room was completely silent, my story spilled out of me along with a lot of tears and snot, people put their hands on my shoulder, some even hugged me. Inside my head I was a total schizophrenic. My ego screaming for escape thinking these people are bat shit cultists, and my quiet side kept saying thank you.

After the meeting Jerry approached me and asked if I had a sponsor. I didn't understand, but I handed him my booklet to be signed.

"Whatever gets you here," as he signed and smiled at me.

"It would behoove you to get a sponsor to guide you through the steps and sober living." I had no answer for that I just smiled back.

"I'll have someone meet you in the lobby tomorrow before this meeting, maybe it'll be a match." I nodded a yes and took my booklet back gathered my crutches and did my best Long John Silver out of there.

The next day I stood in the lobby of the church looking at myself in the reflection of a trophy case. I was dressed in some trendy rags propped up by my crutches. I thought not too bad maybe I'll get some sympathy. The door opened behind me and in stepped Daryl B. a very tall Black man in an amazing suit. He gazed at me primping my hair in the reflection and barked, "It ain't about that."

Daryl strutted over to me taking me in with each step. "Shit, you haven't done anything for anybody your whole life." Standing there looking at me like I was a museum piece. I didn't have an answer.

"Okay this is the way it's going to go. You are going to learn about service, helping other people. You'll start by washing coffee cups after the meeting." I tried to interject. Daryl put his finger up to his mouth and said, "Pull the cotton out of your ears and put in your mouth." I was afraid of him. I just nodded yes. He nodded back in affirmative.

The following day at meetings end I propped my crutches in the corner and washed about seventy mugs with two other volunteers. When finished I thought I'd make way to my apartment for a little me time. Daryl was standing in the lobby like a watchdog, a Black German Sheppard in a boss suit.

"We're going for coffee. The meeting after the meeting, get use to it." I gestured with my crutches playing the victim card.

"Really? You playing the wussy, I'll break your other leg and make you crawl to the coffee shop." He smiled knowingly. "We got work to do. You're going to trial young man and you don't have a clue. No, I'm not being very nice, you have to earn the nice by growing the fuck up. Do we understand each other?" Again, I nodded followed by a stuttered "Yes." Daryl smothered a laugh and motioned for me to follow.

At coffee Daryl notified me, he would be visiting my apartment. I quietly shook in horror. My abode was an earthquake in Calcutta and now the most critical person I have ever experienced is to enter my domain. "When" I asked cheerily trying to mask my apprehension. "Tomorrow," he said with a smile, "don't wet your pants."

The next afternoon I greeted Daryl at the door of my place. He was carrying a very modern vacuum cleaner.

"I want to watch you clean your apartment," he said with a grin.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Will it be a virgin experience?"

I stood posed on my crutches with my mouth agape.

"Yeah, I thought so. It's a nice place that you turned into a shithole because of your behavior."

That word again, behavior. He opened my closet and a landslide of dirty laundry tumbled out onto the floor. He ran his finger over my windowsills and showed me the dust.

"Let's start with cleaning house outside and then we'll move inside."

I didn't have an answer so I started to clean. I did several loads of laundry; vacuumed and mopped the floors, dusted windowsills, desktops, all tops. And when I was done I waited for my grade, hoping for some kudos.

"So how do you feel?" Daryl asked as if a country doctor.

I stopped a moment and looked around. My place was clean and looked like a human being lived in it. There were piles of clean and folded clothes to wear, everything seemed in order, I looked at Daryl and he smiled at me. "Thank you" I said.

I can't explain the next few weeks, it felt like I was rising out of a deep mist. My life suddenly had structure. I would rise out of bed; pray, make my bed, eat breakfast, read the Big book, write and prep for Daryl, then go to a meeting. I stopped myself in the midst of this busyness and realized I was happy. I was doing mundane things, taking care of myself and I was happy. The ordinary had surprisingly become extra-ordinary.

Later that day I met with Daryl after the meeting and humbly shared my happiness. He looked at me with compassion and said, "The shoe is about to drop. I'm sorry to be the bearer of this news. I see you working hard to change but there are several hurdles ahead of you. The first and maybe most difficult is making amends to Chloe's parents followed by a trial." I sat stilled by the news letting it penetrate. Making amends to Chloe's parents terrified me, going to trial was blinding, but amidst it all I was happy. I couldn't explain this new feeling of peace but I tried.

Daryl looked at me, "You're starting to get it. It's an inside job. Nothing outside can really make you happy. Your happiness is within you, probably the last place you'd look." We laughed together for the first time.

In the weeks to come I ardently worked through the twelve steps. The one I feared the most was the ninth step in which I had to make amends. Daryl suggested I make amends to people with lesser grievance and build up to making amends to Chloe's parents. The dread wore on me. I couldn't avoid it any longer. Through Officer Carpenter, I found out where her parents resided.

I stood at the bottom of stone stairway leading up to an upper middle class brick house surrounded by a well-attended garden. I felt my heart pounding in my chest as I took each step deliberately. Reaching the door, I felt woozy and thought I might vomit. This must be done I thought. I can't carry this weight any longer. I pushed the doorbell gently. The clang of the chimes seemed so much louder than my touch inferred. I heard footsteps from the upstairs pad towards the entrance. I started to hyperventilate; my head started to spin like I was smashed. Not now please I need to be a human being.

The door opened and there stood the doppelganger of Chloe, similar hairstyle, trendy clothes but there was no wickedness in her face. Her face held peace. She seemed self-contained. I'm positive my face looked aghast, struggling not to faint I held onto the stairway railing, trying to focus.

"Can I help you?" she asked. Then she took me in seeing my state. I started to cry. I felt her hand on my shoulder, gently pulling me into the house. Next, I was seated in an over stuffed armchair and given a glass of water and a tissue.

“You must be Rowan,” she said kindly. “

I’m Cheri, I’ve been expecting you.”

“You’ve been expecting me?”

“I’ve heard through the grapevine that you would be making amends.”

“You heard through the grapevine?”

“I’m in the same program as you. I’m a recovering drunk and addict. I have five years.”

“Holy fuck!” When would I wake from this nightmare?

“My twin sister entered the rooms with me. She was too smart, ‘too cool for school’. I tried to save her but you can’t help someone unless they have the willingness. I knew who she was. She was just like me, except I wanted a change and she wanted to set the world on fire.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sure your sorry and at fault to some degree but not enough to spend years in prison.” My ears perked up in disbelief.

“What?”

“My sister could tempt the devil. You were an easy target. I know because I was her five years ago. I was a behavior chameleon. I could be anyone I wanted to, get what I wanted. I could be anyone except a real person.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You said it in the doorway to my home. You broke. There was no façade just a hurt soul standing on my doorstep asking for forgiveness.”

“What are you saying?”

“ I talked with my father, my mother passed a year and a half ago. My dad believes Chloe’s life style drove her to the grave. I don’t know, it didn’t help. I’ve told him you were making great efforts to get sober and live a good life. We’re not pressing charges. Do you have any prior arrests?”

“No, I don’t, as amazing as that may seem,” I said in total wonder.

“Well, then they’ll be supervised probation for a couple of years but no prison.”

“Shouldn’t I speak directly with your father?”

“That won’t be necessary. It’s been talked through. We understand what happened. You have a disease and you’re taking care of it now and for the rest of your life. The deal is stay sober, stay out of prison.” She smiled winningly and stood leading me to the door.

“I don’t know what to say,” feeling I’ve been let off too easy and her response was appropriate.

“Getting sober isn’t easy. Staying sober is even more difficult. You have an opportunity to do something good, be of service, an example. It’s a chance for my father and I to forgive. It’s the best we can do.”

I felt like I was on another planet, where people were kind and not self serving. I was so moved and relieved the tears came again. I can’t ever remember crying so much especially in front of people I hardly knew. I embraced her and she hugged back.

Releasing me she said, “Be a good man” smiled and gently closed the door. I stood on

the steps reeling. How could this be? A hundred days ago I killed someone with my drunken arrogance and now I'm forgiven? I sat on the stoop and said a prayer of thanks. Imagine, me now humbly giving thanks that in itself is a miracle.

I decided to walk home instead of Uber. I needed the reflection time, but also wanted Daryl to know what just happened. Padding down the street with my phone against my ear I'm greeted with a recording from Mr. D. "Sorry I am not answering any calls at this moment there has been a family emergency, leave a message and I will get back to you when I am able. Thank you and good day."

Family emergency? Shit. I knew Daryl was married with a four-year-old daughter but had no other proximity to his personal life. He was strictly business, when it came to my sobriety. I left a message asking him to let me know if he was all right. I caught myself. I'm calling someone who I detested for holding up a mirror to my self and now I'm calling because I care.

I didn't hear from Daryl that night but saw him at the meeting the next morning. Old-timers, people with sober time, surrounded him. He saw me and approached, "I'm sorry I didn't get back to you." I read the pain in his face and the concern of everyone in the room. "What's up?" I said. "I appreciate your call. My little girl was in a fatal accident." I was so struck I had no idea how to behave, and then I felt myself step into Daryl and hold him. I felt this mountain of a man shake in sadness his tears



soaking the shoulder of my coat. In this terrible moment I allowed myself to feel everything and emerge a human.