

Are you an alcoholic?

A self-test

“How many beers have you had?” Haley asked again.

I could tell she was flustered. A familiar, faint blue vein ran diagonally across one side of her forehead, just under her hairline. She sprawled across the small black futon as if she could soften the interrogation by pretending to watch an episode of Chopped playing in the background.

I shut the fridge door slowly and prepared a response in the dim light of the connected kitchen. “Some of those cans are from yesterday.”

She sat upright. “I just don’t get why you need to be fucked up before we fuck.”

“I don’t.”

“But you always are.”

It was true and I wished I had a reason other than that I really enjoyed it. Even afterwards, I’d crave a beer. I’d pee then grab a fresh can and drink it standing, one hand supporting my weight against the cool glass of the floor-to-ceiling window. Naked, I’d stare at the city lights and inhale the smoke drifting from the bed.

“You always smoke afterwards,” I said.

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“It just is. I can’t explain it, but it is.”

I fell face-first onto the twin bed across the cramped studio, half-expecting to make her laugh.

“Listen, I found this test.”

“Oh boy.” I looked to the slightly-whiter space above the futon, a permanent clean shadow left by a trophy display. It lay hidden now, a beautiful homemade cabinet made of dark brown walnut with a shelf for trophies and a rack of wooden antlers—my undergrad school’s mascot was a stag—projecting from the top, perfect for hanging medals along the carved-in ridges.

“I found this test online, and it’s supposed to figure out if you have a drinking problem.”

“I can’t.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m twenty-five.”

“Question one: when drinking with other people, do you try to have a few extra drinks when other people don’t know about it? I’m going to mark that as a yes.”

“No.”

“No? You drank a whole beer while I was in the bathroom.”

“Yeah, but you’re not even drinking. So technically, I’m not drinking with other people.”

She sat on my lap, and I barely felt the soft pressure of her hundred pound frame. I kissed her, and she ran a hand through my beard.

“Rob, I’m not saying this is a big deal. I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“Okay.”

“Can we just run through a couple questions?”

“Yeah.”

“But Rob, you have to be honest with me, okay?”

“Yeah.” I tried for slightly annoyed, but it came out soft and high, an unsure squawk.

#

Are you in a hurry to get your first drink of the day?

“Do you have any other questions?” This was a hint that the conversation was ending, but this guy across from my desk was not having it.

“I’m just really stressed about this second paper,” he said. He was a nontraditional student, a lofty way of saying someone fucked up the first half of his life and made it up by asking too many questions in class.

“Mhm, stress. Yep, it can be stressful.” I tried to check the clock on the other side of the shared office, but his fat shoulders blocked my view. The light outside had softened into a shade of blood orange.

I steered the big wheelie chair I was sitting in toward the side of my desk, pausing to shuffle with the mess inside the leather bag at my feet—another signal to him.

“The citation stuff is kind of confusing. The last time I was in school we used—”

“Oh, you know what? APA, MLA, FAA, NWA, you can use whatever you want because—” I put a hand to one side of my mouth and whispered this last part “—I heard the teaching assistant for this class is a lazy asshole and doesn’t care.”

He wasn’t satisfied. I wanted to grab a handful of his plaid shirt and drag him out with me. I had to be home soon because—and this is something no one told me before I moved downtown—every grocery, liquor store, or newsstand closed by eight pm.

I stood and shifted backward toward the door in a kind of passive aggressive moonwalk. Still, he didn't move, and I knew we were locked in a battle of wills. Office hours were up, but I couldn't bear to kick him out. I reached the door and traced my fingers against the dulled brass doorknob before opening it, hoping he'd relent and stand up. He didn't.

I really did feel bad about leaving without him.

I sprinted outside and scared a pack of old ladies who took up too much space on the sidewalk, but the bus pulled away just ahead of me. I wanted to drop to my knees and scream, but I settled for punching an extremely hard garbage can. I caught the next bus and gripped the aluminum pole so tightly that sweat from my hand dripped in beads down the reflective surface. The driver grunted when I finally got off, like he was relieved I was gone.

I ran, ignoring intersection stoplights, crisscrossing through dwindling tourist groups and homeless mobs—the only people who stayed in this shell of a neighborhood past five. It was all in vain because even from a block away I could see the liquor store was dark and empty. I walked to the door anyway and tugged at the steel handle, hoping that someone inside might make an exception for their best customer.

No one came. I paced outside the door and thought about hopping onto a train, going from station to station in search of a nearby bar. But I wasn't looking to socialize or drink heavily. What I craved—the nagging feeling that dug into my back along with the ache caused by schlepping a bag filled with graded SOC 101 midterms—was to sit back in a chair and drink beer out of a glass, a perfect Budweiser moment that would justify the day, hush the suspicion that I too was fucking up the first half of my life.

“They’re closed, kid,” a man said.

I had zoned out, leaning forehead-first against the building. When I saw how close he was I jumped back, and not just because he was homeless.

“I know” I said, sounding angrier than I had intended.

He could have passed for a normal guy, but new and old sweat stains overlapped in a film on his shirt, like layers of sediment an archeologist could trace back to months ago when this guy probably found it. “Shit man, just letting you know.” He walked away. A torn case of Bud Ice dangled from his left hand, and his forearm was tensed from the strain.

“Hold up.” He didn’t slow down, so I ran in front of him and shuffled backward in an uncomfortable harmony with his steps. “Need some cash?”

“Wouldn’t turn it down.”

He stopped, and I was glad because I had almost walked ass-first into a busy street. “Let me buy that case off you.”

He raised it to eye level and squinted. “Jesus man, if you wanted to bum a beer you could’ve just asked.” He set the case down, opened two cans, and handed one to me.

We drank under the awning of some unused commercial property, a former payday loans place with a peeling poster of the company’s cartoon fox mascot glued to a far wall. The beer was warm and stale-tasting, like old, sour rice.

“Mm, crisp. It’s got a real orange note,” I said.

“Get ya drunk, I suppose.”

The next silence was so long and painful that I began to sweat, and he said something just to let me off the hook.

“You a student?”

“Kind of.” I put the can to my mouth to stall for time. “What do you do?” I asked and then sucked some air through my teeth as if I could draw the question back.

He chuckled, the noise sounding more like a light cough. “Land surveyor.”

I killed the rest of my beer and dropped the can; the hollow tin sound carried far beyond where we stood. Even though the sun had set and the street lamps’ weak glow lit only half his worn face, he was clearly glaring at me, so I took the can to a nearby bin. When I returned he was sitting cross-legged, back against the building’s wall. I guess I thought it would’ve been rude to walk away so I took a seat next to him, and he handed me another beer.

We drank and talked for a while. I couldn’t hear a lot of what he was saying because he spoke quickly and his voice was distorted like a bad phone connection. So, I did most of the talking.

By beer eight, he knew the salient details of my life story, although I mostly glossed over work and school. I felt compelled to relay my track history: the medals, the meets, and the synthetic rubber path, so hot in the summer it imprinted a checkered pattern on the backs of stretched-out legs. I talked about how the track was both hard and soft and how after eight years of devoting your life to something it could just end.

“You get hurt?” he asked.

“No, nothing like that,” I said.

He grunted and said something like, “that’s good.”

“It’s just that I always had my thing. And then this path that I had—” I started to tear up but I coughed through it. “Goddamn, I was in the low elevens for the hundred meter, and I could do longer stuff, too.”

He stood. I thought he was finding a dark place to pee, but he said he was taking off.

“Going where?” I asked.

“See my lady.”

“Your lady?” Even with a buzz, I could tell my surprise was impolite.

“Got places to be.”

I pulled out a twenty dollar bill. “Let’s just finish the case.”

He took it but meandered away. “Got places to be.”

For the second time that night I ran after him, only now I knew him well enough to grab his shoulder. “Come on, dude.”

He snapped back, shrugging my hand off and slapping my arm away with a surprising power. “The fuck is wrong with you, kid? You a fag or something?”

I just stood there, reeling, feeling something like whiplash. He moved from me again, still slow and calm.

“You just ruined a perfectly pleasant evening with that!”

He didn’t turn around.

Once the shock wore off, I laughed at the strangeness of the situation. But the laughter trailed away, and I hoped he’d come back. A late summer breeze dried out my sweaty, matted hair and I poured the half-empty hand-warmed beer into the street.

Have you ever had a DWI (driving while intoxicated) or DUI (driving under the influence of alcohol) violation, or any other legal problem related to your drinking?

She moved through the street, weaving through traffic as if she had it all planned out. Eventually, we stood a few shoulder lengths apart at opposite ends of the Plexiglas-walled bus bench.

She was pale, with pierced eyebrows, short bleached hair, and a cigarette in her mouth; she was the type of girl who would look ridiculous if she weren't smoking. I caught myself looking at her a few times, which confused me because everything about her was asymmetrical, and she was skinny to the point of suspicion. Her calves were like taffy stretched out too thin, robbed of all tensile strength, about to snap. But for a second I thought about how good she'd look without the pea green puffy coat, how it would feel to lift her entire weight onto a bed without straining.

The bus' double doors whooshed open, and the warm air from inside came out in a gust strong enough to flip some hair over my eyes. She walked in first, and I followed her all the way back and took the seat next to hers. Soon, I felt a heat more powerful than climate control. It was like settling into a starting block; my heart rate slowed so much that every beat felt twice as important.

Two weeks later I saw her at a bar near campus. I was out with the other teaching assistants for the first time, and while they messed with a flashy *Wheel of Shots* mounted at the far end of the bar, I hunched over a pint glass.

It took me a moment to recognize her. She ordered a drink and did not sound like I expected. Her voice was clean, musical. The way she said *grenadine* sent a chill through my body.

“Hi,” I said.

She smiled but didn’t respond.

“I like your hair.”

“Oh, boy,” she said, laughing through it.

“What?”

“I should teach you how to flirt.”

I thought she was joking, but when the bartender returned she led me to a corner table and planted her elbows like she was getting down to some serious business. “Do you know how often women get compliments? It’s boring.”

“So an insult then?”

“Anything interesting: compliment, insult, declarative statement.”

“I own two Jet Skis.”

“See, but now I know you’re lying.”

“How?”

She traced her index finger along the length of my forehead then tapped twice like she was checking for a hollow sound. “Eyebrows are nature’s polygraph. This end creeps up, and I know you’re insincere.”

“Yeah, but that human lie detector stuff is mostly bullshit.”

“Mostly.”

“Fine, my father owns two Jet Skis.”

“Take me now.”

We talked for a while and she was fun and funny and I didn't even mind the clumsy pauses in conversation. The silence allowed me to study her face; it sounds weird, but every few moments I'd notice something new, or look at her in a different way, and she changed in front of my eyes, shifting from punk-bus-stop-girl to Haley.

Eventually she grabbed my wrist and led me to my officemates. I introduced her, and she worked the room like a pro, joking around and telling stories and being interested in everyone else's stories. Once in a while she brushed her hand against my shoulder as a reminder that she wasn't forgetting about me.

“You have nice shoulders,” she said.

Sprinter's shoulders, I wanted to say. Then I'd recite a line about actually being built for long distance, but something about her muffled the instinct.

“You have nice everything,” I said instead.

“Terrible, really bad stuff. I have taught you nothing.”

“There's a lot of other stuff I'm terrible at.”

She smiled wide, and this time I was leading, away from the group and into a cramped single-bathroom. The overhead lamp was too bright, so she flipped the switch off and enough light came in through the door's cracks for us to see. We kissed eagerly. Our teeth bumped together, and I could feel that we both smiled.

I cupped my hands under her butt and lifted her onto the sink's edge, and she struggled with the clasp on her jeans before sliding the waist down to her knees. I went down on her. I didn't really have a game plan but I did something right because I heard

the sound of tearing paper and saw her clutching half a crumpled note, a flyer for a band called “Snarl Marx” she had ripped of the wall.

Someone knocked at the door. We ignored it, but the knocking grew louder, and the flimsy door shifted inward with every blow. She clutched my face with hands ten degrees cooler than my own skin and jumped down from the sink. She pressed her back against the door, and I knelt and continued, periodically looking up to see if the door was caving in from the barrage of pounding. It stayed intact, and Haley came just as the knocking stopped. I stood and unbuckled my belt, but she stopped me.

“I’m not doing *that* in a bathroom.”

“I did.”

“Yeah, pretty impressed.” She kissed my neck and picked up the torn flier on which she scribbled an address with a tube of maroon lipstick she produced from a back pocket.

“You have a smartphone, right?”

“Yeah, but why don’t we just—”

“We should leave separately.”

I backed up a step, and she probably thought I was hurt.

“You work with those guys, right? You should stay for a while so they don’t tell stories about that weird time you disappeared.”

She left first, and I stayed in the bathroom for a bit, bouncing with unabashed happiness.

I paid my tab, said goodbye to my coworkers and mapped the short walk to Haley’s house. Outside, I skipped through a strip of bars and veered off into a residential

area filled with rundown homes for hipster students and working poor, the kind of neighborhood that seamlessly combined skinny jeans and gun violence. I was near Haley's home, but the skipping loosened something inside me and I had to pee.

I sidled next to a small red-bricked house, but an automatic light went off and I couldn't perform under the spotlight. I picked out two tall shrubs in another yard and fit perfectly between them, my shoulders just grazing the unbending branches.

Before the lights or the sirens, I noticed the unmistakable sound of a car in idle, a sneaky hum which I heard in the same way a gazelle can sense a lion's breathing. I stopped midstream, zipped up, and walked slowly into the backyard.

An engine revved. I ran. The lights were so bright the small fenced-in backyard lit up in a red and blue glow. The noise was a physical force, a wind at my back pushing me forward through the backyard, over the fence, through more yards, through the street, aimlessly forward until I was sprinting so quickly that my ankle locked mid-stride and my right foot came down weird. I tripped and stumbled to the ground.

That's how the cop found me. The car ambled forward with the lights still going. I raised my hands instinctively, though I felt ridiculous and eventually brought them down. He got out and squatted down, heels up, bouncing his weight up and down, hands pressed against the sides of his legs. "Had a bit of a tumble there, sport?" He patted my head and stood straight, knees clicking as he rose. "You should stretch next time." He smelled like cigarettes.

I remained at ground level for a while and felt something more than embarrassment. My muscles were strained to near immobility, and I couldn't look directly at the crumpled yellow paperwork he handed to me. There were drying stains on

my jeans and I still kind of had to pee, and the worst part was I started crying and couldn't stop. It didn't make sense because I had gotten tickets before, but this time it was like shame and loss and a feeling like walking through thick, slowing fog.

I made it to her place, though. She opened the door in a big white t-shirt, and had a faint crease on one side of her face. I thought she'd be mad about how late I was, but she smiled and led me to her bedroom, and we lay there with her chest pressed against my back. We didn't have sex, but she brushed her cool hand against my forearm for most of the night, soothing the strain that had settled in my stomach.

#

Do you drink heavily when you are disappointed, under pressure or have had a quarrel with someone?

I don't remember the exact setup to the fight, but for a couple weeks Haley paid special attention to the trophy case. She'd run her hand against the dark grain and sigh whenever she thought I wasn't watching. She bumped into it so often I figured she was doing it on purpose.

"It's just kind of bizarre," she said one night, unhooking a bronze medal.

"That's my favorite one, Dekalb, spring of 2007. It was one of those weirdly cold days in April, but my lungs held up alright."

"This is what I mean." She carefully placed it back onto an antler.

"You just have to be aware of your lung function at—"

"Last night you got drunk and slurred through the Northern Conference invite story, twice." She stood straighter. Up to this point it felt playful, like maybe we'd get

real close together and she'd bite at my neck and we'd fall to the floor. "And you can't go a day without comparing something to the feeling of settling into a starting block."

"You wouldn't understand."

"I played volleyball."

"Volleyball? Not the same."

"Fine, I could talk about the crazy commission I made last month. What if I only talked about graduating summa cum laude? My perfect attendance award from grade school?"

"Track was a part of my life, Haley."

"Was! Was! Sometimes it's like you can't even enjoy the shit going on around you because you're too busy jerking off to the mental image of your body squeezed into a unitard."

I had been slipping in and out of a nervous smile, but for this I conjured the most ill-tempered stare I could muster. "It's a fucking speedsuit."

What killed me was she didn't storm out. She composed herself and took what felt like an hour to put on a jacket before leaving in silence.

I started drinking right away. It was a cliché, I know, but I yanked a full case from the fridge and drank it cross-legged on the floor while I watched freight trucks take up all the space on the highway across from my building. Past that, a few dozen lanterns lit the trail around a poorly placed public park; the lights looked like a loose formation of ground-level stars.

Twelve beers deep, my face was pressed against the glass and I couldn't look away from the newly beautiful spots of light, their intensity rising and falling and breaking out into striations as it became harder to focus on one point.

I charged into a closet and tore down coat hangers and piles of clothes in search of my high school box. I found it under a pile of sweatshirts and raised it in victory before carefully unpacking the contents on the surface of my bed. Inside, an immaculately folded baby blue speedsuit called to me.

I pulled off my shirt, tugging so hard I could hear fabric rip. Getting my pants off was a challenge too. I almost fell a second time, but soon I was wearing the tight, elesatane uniform, struggling with a pair of narrow track spikes.

I barely made it out of my building. The track shoes' hard tips slid against the slick marble floors of the lobby. I had better luck with the concrete outside, and I ran as soon as I hit sidewalk. One city block, then a crosswalk over a highway, through a field of grass, and I was on a pathway encircling a manmade lake. The first half-lap was hard; I was out of breath and my stomach felt like it was caving inwards, but I fell into a rhythmic stride and the pain dissolved. My body numbed to sensation, and I focused on wading through darkness toward the next light, perfectly following the path lain out for me.

I lost track of the completed laps and stumbled forward from exhaustion, walking toward the slick-looking body of water in the center of the park. The ground softened and sloped downward, and all I could think about was the cooling black water soothing the dry-hot itch caused by friction between the fabric of my uniform and skin.

I fell to my knees and crawled forward, wading through rough woodchips all the way into cold, shallow water. I went into the deeper end, and my breath hurried along with the effort it took to keep my body afloat.

It was weirdly calming for a while until it became so dark that I didn't know which direction I had come from. My stomach cramped, and it became harder and harder to kick my legs. Even through the numbing gloss of twelve beers I felt real fear, a choking panic that slowed my progress back toward land. Soon, I was barely swimming, more clawing at the water, pleading with it until I could hold out no longer. And that's when I reached the edge.

I crawled out and lay on the craggy ground for an hour, throwing up in between deep, joyful breaths.

I woke in my apartment the next morning and instinctively turned to the window. In daylight, the park looked open and plain, so unimpressive and harmless that the wave of embarrassment made me forget about the ache in my body and the stale-sour taste in my mouth. I ripped the trophy case off the wall.

#

“Three no's in a row. Looks like you're in the clear.” Haley walked to the television and hushed the outrageous yelling of the Iron Chef Chairman. “I guess that wasn't very scientific.”

I gripped the can in my hand and saw how absurd it was that I had been drinking during the quiz. “Yeah, kinda silly.”

She came out of the kitchen with a fresh garbage bag, peeled two clinging sides, and flipped it up and back down in a plastic bravura that filled it with air for a moment

until it relaxed and hung flaccid from her hand. “I’m a little disappointed. I could have been one of those noble, supportive wives of an alcoholic, a real Florence Nightingale type.” She zigzagged across the room, plucking cans from side tables and tossing them into the bag. “For some reason, in this fantasy we’re sitting around in a circle talking about childhood traumas. You’d have a blanket wrapped around your shoulders, and I’d make brownies for the whole group.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, or cookies or some kind of nut bar.”

I walked to her and took her hands as she reached for another can, guiding them down so that we both held the ends of the thin plastic material. “No, I mean, if you actually thought I was an alcoholic.”

“I don’t really. I just—I guess I’m paranoid about anything being between us.”

“But if you did.”

The direction of her stare darted around like she was looking for something new in my face. “God, Rob, if you think you really need help. I mean, I was making light of things, but if you really—”

“What? No.” I left her for a moment to retrieve the half-full beer. She followed me to the kitchen, and I poured it into the sink, rotating the can so the amber stream undulated with the movement of my wrist. “See?”

“Yeah, okay, but there’s like twenty more in the fridge. You gonna pour those out?”

“That’s not the point.”

“It’s not?”

“What you said before, about cupcakes.”

“Well, brownies, or cookies, or nut—”

“You would do that, for real?”

“Sure.” Her eyebrows stayed level, and the way she said it was important, not aloof or jokey, but sincere and warm and clear, like she believed it herself, like she pictured herself over a cluttered kitchen counter, straining to stir a bowl of batter that had seized up, while I’m laying around like a useless shit—yes, I’m wrapped in an itchy wool blanket—and she’s looking at me and thinking *Yeah, he’s a useless piece of shit and Yeah, he is one public urination ticket away from becoming a sex offender, and he almost drowned in a koi pond, but Goddamnit, I’m here to stay*, and even though I’m still useless and I’m off the path and that means—fuck, I lost it—lost the thought.

But at the time, the thought was so clear I went into the main room and lifted the garbage bag by the bottom end. Partly-crushed cans spilled out into a pile on the carpet.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I went to the closet and rummaged through boxes, rounding up every high school and college artifact I could find: trophies, medals, and an antler I snapped off the case just before Haley put a hand on my shoulder.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“You’re my track now.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I tried and failed to stifle a loud, pork-smelling burp. “Trust me, it’s profound.”

She followed me to the waste chute in the hallway but kept her hand pressed against its metallic hatch. “Don’t.”

“These fuckers need to go.”

We stood outside my building’s front entrance. I set the bag down and we pulled medals by the handful, some of their blue ribbons looping around our fingers in a desperate last cling. We awarded them to passing strangers. Haley gave out a “world’s most confusing facial hair” medal to a man wearing a big white fedora; I handed an honorable mention to a kid with a shiny black pompadour and just-pubescent mustache. Most people laughed and accepted the gifts; it’s amazing how willing people are to accept a prize they didn’t earn. The most remarkable thing was that the streets were crowded; the normally barren downtown was filled with families walking alongside young couples and excitable teenagers.

I saved a smaller, heavier medal made of concentrated bronze for last. I bestowed that honor upon a tall homeless man who came lumbering toward us. He drank out of a 42 ounce can of Heineken Light, and Haley gave him the “healthier choices” award. He wore it proudly and offered us each a sip of his cold beer.