

## Decisions

Alcohol makes dumb decisions. It doesn't feel like it when you're in the midst of active alcoholism, but it does. When I quit drinking, I'd accumulated more than \$40,000 in credit card debt. Almost none of that debt came from putting alcohol on a credit card. First, I didn't want to be an alcoholic who bought liquor on credit. That's bad. Second, and more importantly, I didn't want to leave a written record. If I keeled over from a heart attack, whoever took over the bills would certainly notice all those liquor store purchases and I'd be disgraced. Didn't want that.

That's not to say I didn't spend a lot of money on alcohol. Most nights, I drank a pint of vodka. A half gallon would go for four nights. (Or whatever liter amount that is. Nobody says, "I'm going out to pick up 1.75 liters of vodka." We say "half gallon.") I bought Old Mr. Boston or Barton's at a little less than ten bucks a bottle. That's what it cost at the end of my drinking, anyway. That was about seventy dollars a month at the end. I figure that over twenty years, it works out to about fifteen thousand dollars. I couldn't spend that money without justification. I rarely bought clothes, didn't go to movies, didn't play golf, or do much of anything else. I bought booze and cigarettes.

So, if I wasn't putting alcohol on credit cards, where did all that debt come from? Dumb decisions made under the influence of alcohol. And, very little of it was stuff. It was just living and dumb decisions. My oldest daughter spent her first two years in college at Young Harris College. She had a couple of scholarships and earned tuition money from work-study. That didn't pay for it all, though. To make up the difference, we both had to borrow money. The government has a loan program for parents called PLUS that provides low interest loans with a long payout schedule. I intended to apply for that. Never did. Instead of completing the paperwork, I'd come home, fill my glass with vodka, go to the porch and drink and smoke.

I did that each afternoon until the day the letter came from Young Harris College saying the tuition balance was due in two days and Heather would be dismissed from school if I didn't send a payment pronto. Yikes! I rushed to my office and dug around for the "convenience checks" from the credit card company. You know those cash advance checks that have a 22% interest rate attached to them. I'd write the check for a few thousand dollars, and then rush to the post office to pay fifteen bucks to express mail the payment.

Back home, I'd refill my glass, light another cigarette, and make a solemn promise not to let that happen again. Then I'd forget and another semester would arrive, and I'd do it all over again. The \$40,000 came from stuff like that.

Dumb decisions. Failure to act.

Liquor almost got me married once. I became reacquainted with Susan Loftin at a Christmas party in 1971. We'd graduated from high school together, but we hadn't been friends there. Our only interaction was when she approached me during our senior year. She'd been assigned the task of asking me if I would consider joining the drama club and be a part of the senior play. Apparently, somebody thought it would be a good idea because of my work in radio. The prospect terrified me. I'd have to perform in front of actual people. There was no way I would do that. I declined.

At the party almost four years later, I was immediately attracted to Susan. She had long, jet-black hair, full lips, and gorgeous eyes and was an art major at the University of

Georgia, which appealed to my need to be around somebody who eschewed material things. It wasn't until later in life, when I grew up, that I realized material things are not all bad. I had my alcohol buzz going, of course, so I was able to talk to her. We made a date to meet again back in Athens.

Our relationship moved along quickly. I was amazed that someone I liked actually seemed to like me back. In less than a month, we became intimate—my first consummated relationship that I didn't pay for. The guilt afterwards was just about as powerful as it was after Effies, but, as with the guilt drinking alcohol produced, that didn't stop me from doing it again.

Three months later, we were going back to Newnan for the weekend. The trip requires a drive through Atlanta, and we stopped and ate at a restaurant there. After some drinks, I was in a stall in the bathroom urinating when I was overwhelmed with the notion that it would be a very good idea to ask Susan to marry me. Just like that. We hadn't said anything about marriage and we hadn't been seeing each very long at all. She was the first woman who showed an interest in me who I enjoyed being with. I'm sure the sex part had something to do with it, too. When I returned from the bathroom, I had a couple of more drinks – double scotches on the rocks with a splash. Those drinks firmly decided me.

After dinner, I told Susan I wanted to show her something. I drove my VW bus to a place where I liked to go when I was living in Atlanta. I couldn't wait too long to pop the question. I needed to get it out before the booze wore off. Never took long for that to happen. Soon, we were sitting in my bus at end of Camp Creek Parkway between runways 9 left and 9 right of the Atlanta airport. The terminal for Hartsfield-Jackson airport stands on that spot now.

A bright orange full moon was just above the horizon. Susan and I sat in the VW's middle seat watching the jets landing and taking off in front of a full moon. It was a gorgeous setting, just perfect for romantic stuff. Without much of a preamble I asked her if she wanted to marry me. She said she needed to think about it. An hour later, on the doorstep of her parents' home, she said yes.

As I drove to my parents' house that night after leaving her, I felt excited and relieved. I wouldn't have to worry about the girl thing anymore. That was a very big deal. Yet, I felt uneasy, too. When I woke the next morning, the alcohol was gone and the unease had turned into full-fledged terror and panic. What had I done?

Those feelings had nothing to do with Susan. She was a nice, loving, fun person. Still is. But, she wasn't the person I wanted to marry. I didn't know exactly why. Maybe I just wasn't ready. Now, though, it was too late. How could I back out of it?

We told our parents that weekend, but never got around to making any plans for a wedding. We didn't talk about a date for the wedding except in the vaguest of terms. I would sit in class and look at other females, wishing I could find one to get to know so I could say I found somebody else I was wanted to marry. Bizarrely, I thought that if I had another girlfriend, it might make it easier for Susan rather than my just saying I didn't want to get married. What kind of idiot thought process what that? Today, I call that alcoholic thinking.

I don't think Susan was too excited about the deal either. That winter she announced she and a friend were going to travel out west for spring quarter. They went to Oregon, and then ended up attending a free university in San Francisco. I flew out to see her and

we never discussed our impending marriage. She returned before fall quarter the following year, and the marriage deal was never brought up again. We didn't decide not to get married. We just flat out never talked about it again. Nobody else did either. We saw each other for a while, but that soon petered out, too. Susan and I are still friends and we still haven't talked about that year of angst caused by an alcoholic's poor decision.

Another alcohol influenced decision was made Tuesday night before Thanksgiving in 1972. Dan, Steve, and I were sharing a pitcher of beer at Allen's, a bar in Normaltown in Athens. The bar was nearly empty because most students had gone home for the holiday. Dan was our English Education professor and he lived with his family in Athens. Steve was in still in town because he was a quarterback on the Georgia Bulldogs' scout team. He had practice the next morning. I was still in town because I had to work at the radio station. I probably would have stayed around anyway. I didn't smoke and drink at my parent's house, so I delayed going home when I could.

One pitcher became two, then three, then more. The phrase alcoholics use is, "How about a pitcher or four?" That night we moved quickly through the pleasant initial buzz, past the reasonable good time part, and straight to the stupid decision part. Just past ten o'clock at night, we decided it would be a great idea to go visit one of the other students in our class. The choice was between Marcia and Beth. Marcia was with her family near Washington, D.C. Beth was in Jacksonville. We decided to go to Jacksonville. Even as drunk as we were, we did figure out Jacksonville was good bit closer to us than Washington, D.C.

We decided to go in my VW bus. First, though, we needed to get some road beers. Dan said he had some in his refrigerator at home, so we went there to get it. As we were pulling the twelve packs out of the refrigerator, I thought of Kate, Dan's wife, and his kids. They were asleep. I asked him if Kate would mind his going on this trip. "Nah," he said. "No problem." He left a note on the refrigerator saying he would be back the next day. That was the full explanation. I asked Steve when football practice was. He said in the morning. Wouldn't it be a problem to miss that? "Nah," he said, "No problem."

Let me clarify something here. I am an alcoholic. As far as I know, Dan and Steve are not. Alcohol's stupid decisions affect alcoholics and non-alcoholics a lot. The difference between the two is that non-alcoholics experience the results of a stupid decision and say, "That was dumb. I'm not doing that again," and they don't. Alcoholics think the same thing, but they do it again anyway. Big difference. Huge difference. On this night, alcohol's stupidity was affecting all of us.

We were a couple of miles from Dan's house when my VW exploded. That's what it sounded like anyway. A big bang and my bus was dead. I found out later the engine was blown. We got out and pushed it into the Howard Johnson motel's parking lot.

What to do? The sane thing would have been to forget the trip, but sanity and alcohol don't mix. We decided to go in Steve's Volkswagen Beetle. Problem was, it was across town at the university's dorm for athletes. With great clarity of mind, we stood out in the middle of the four-lane highway, carrying the packs of beer under our arms, and waved down a car. The man agreed to take us to the athletic dorm. I think he was happy to give a ride to a real Georgia Bulldog even if he and his friends were clearly dead drunk.

And off we went in Steve's Beetle. As we approached Jesup, Georgia at about four in the morning, I began to move to the other side of the alcohol experience – the down side.

I was in the back seat, mouth sticky, beard stubbly and past the point where road beers were doing any good. The others had gotten to the same place, so we decided to stop at a Waffle House and get revitalized.

As we were eating waffles and eggs, it occurred to Dan that we didn't know where Beth lived in Jacksonville. The cook behind the counter overheard us, which wasn't hard since we were the only ones in the restaurant, and said he had a Jacksonville phone book. We found the address, but still didn't know where it was. One of us said the street name aloud. Surprisingly, the cook knew exactly where it was and gave us detailed directions.

We drove across the bridge into Jacksonville around six a.m. Too early to go visiting. We decided we'd wait until eight. After spending ninety minutes in a coffee shop, we decided maybe seven-thirty would be OK.

When Beth's dad opened their door, he found three unshaven, disheveled, unwashed, men with stale beer breath on his porch. Two were students and one was his daughter's professor. He invited us in and Beth's mother called up to her. We were still standing in the foyer when Beth appeared in her robe on the stairs. "What?" she said puzzled. She certainly looked surprised. Beth's mother made breakfast for us and we ate again. The four o'clock meal was long gone. After an hour, we pulled out of their driveway in Steve's VW.

And, now, the reckoning began.

The now sober Dan decided maybe Kate wasn't going to be so happy to have her husband leave her with two kids with a note on the refrigerator saying, "Be back tomorrow." These were long before the days of cell phones. When you were gone, you were gone.

Now it occurred to us that Coach Dooley probably wasn't going to be very happy to have one of his quarterbacks not show up for practice.

Dan worked out a plan. First, we stopped and used a pay phone. He called Coach Vince Dooley and told him he needed Steve to help present at a meeting. Coach could hardly argue with an academic request. Next, Dan decided he'd better hurry up and get home. We drove him to the Jacksonville airport. Flights were fully booked, but they believed space would become available.

Steve and I drove back to Athens while Dan flew to Atlanta and rented a car to drive to Athens. It turned out we all arrived in Athens at the same time Steve and I did. Dan's newly found concern that morning was confirmed when he got home. Kate was not happy. Don't know if Coach Dooley ever found out. I had nobody who cared, but I wasn't happy.

The whole thing was an alcohol induced dumb decision. I hadn't started daily drinking yet, but I had already begun to realize where those led. Here's the really dumb thing and a no-doubt-about-it indicator of alcohol's hold on me: it took me twenty more years of drinking to quit doing stuff like that.