

Failure

Alcohol creates failure. Sometimes the failures are spectacular. Sometimes they're subtle. Sometimes it happens right away. Sometimes it takes decades. I wasn't immune. No alcoholic is. It kills me to think about my biggest alcohol-fueled failure.

In 1989 I decided to write for publication. In 1994 St. Martin's Press published my first mystery novel. Publishers Weekly and Mystery News had some nice things to say about it. In 1996, my second novel was published. The Kirkus Reviews starred their review, indicating my novel was particularly recommended. The book was well reviewed by some major newspapers such as the Dallas Morning News. There was a nice mention in Playboy. Two of my short stories appeared in the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. Writer's Digest magazine featured an article I wrote and I was on its cover holding my second novel. That article was republished several times in subsequent publications.

A good start to a promising career in writing – and I drank it up. Drank it up until my writing was deader than a doornail.

I began writing after a board of education member of my school district, known for her erratic behavior, threatened to do all she could to have me fired. She thought I'd talked about her to my principal. That stemmed from a fifteen-second conversation I'd had with the principal, telling him what I'd heard about the board member raising Cain with another school's faculty in a meeting.

The whole thing was really dumb, but I was concerned anyway. As an individual board member, the woman had no authority to do anything herself. The board as a whole has authority to act, not individual members. In addition, tenure laws protected me from that kind of job action, anyway. I had a twelve-month contract, though, unusual for a high school counselor. The extra two months of pay provided critical support for my family. If somehow she got two more members on her side, maybe they could reduce my contract.

Anxiety consumed me and I had no defense against it except to self-medicate with alcohol. I began trying to figure out what I could do to make up the two months salary in case I lost it. Given my salary in the late nineteen eighties, that meant I needed to come up with about six thousand extra dollars a year.

I'd been writing little pieces since I'd been in college. When I was a volunteer for the Teacher Corps in Atlanta in 1971, I spent many afternoons sitting in the strip joints on Tenth Street writing philosophical thoughts on napkins while drinking scotch with a splash. Here's an example I still have:

A collection – collection—collectors lose. Rohmer said so. “La Collectionneuse.” Is he right? Doe he mean everybody loses – like Camus or Sartre? French – why are they lacking meaning?

In order for a collector to collect, something must be hurt. A collector takes from somebody – inevitably. It's inherent in collection. Well then, does love inevitably cause one to be a collector? No, not if all involved parties are involved in love. Definition of a collector – one who indiscriminately collects without taking the trouble to see who is hurt. If no one is hurt, then

no collection is involved. Hurt is the key, the all important element.”

OK, so that stuff was the rambling words of a drunk guy just barely out of adolescence. It wouldn't sell, but surely I could write something that would. After all, I wasn't trying to get a quarter of a million dollars like John Gresham received for his first novel. Getting somebody to pay a measly six thousand for a whole novel ought to be easy, I figured.

By this time, our third daughter had been born and our kids were eight, five, and two years old. Pat and I took turns on weekend mornings taking care of them so each of us could have a morning off. Saturday morning was my morning off. I sat down in front of my Apple IIe computer with the black screen and green text and started writing a mystery novel.

I was a hundred pages into the book when a friend told me how publishers would pay you based on what he called “partials.” Send some chapters to the publisher or an agent, and they'll give you an advance on your future royalties. That sounded good, so I bought a book that listed literary agents, started with the A's and started sending five page single spaced letters asking them to look the first three first draft chapters and to please send me some money.

When I got no response to those letters, I did more research. Should have done that first. It turns out getting somebody to publish your writing is harder than I thought. Millions of people have the desire, but few are successful. In fact, a whole business of self-publication exists because people are willing to pay to have their writing published when they can't get legitimate publishers to do it. So much for my theory that my taking less money would entice publishers.

The stuff I learned was discouraging, but sometimes having an obsessive-compulsive disorder's a good thing. I set about learning all I could about the publishing business to give myself a better shot of having some publisher buy my novel. I checked books out of the library, bought books from the bookstore, and subscribed to magazines like *Publisher's Weekly* and *Writer's Digest*.

Some things became obvious quickly. First, I needed to finish the book. First timers almost never sold novels on partials. New writers can sell non-fiction on partials sometimes if their subject matter is compelling, but not fiction. The letter I was sending with the sample chapters was called a query letter. The one I'd been sending was all wrong. It was way too long. The recommended length was one page instead of the three page letters I had been sending. I needed to make my writing in that letter be as perfect as it could be to stand out above the competition. I read the “how to write” books, too. I learned about limiting exposition, effectively writing dialog, and being sure every sentence advanced the story.

I read something else and almost two decades later I can see those words in my mind's eye as clear as a bell. I don't remember the author, but I remember the words: “A word of warning: Don't drink alcohol while you write. If your writing becomes connected to your drinking, you're on a sure road to a 28-day program and no writing career.”

No problem, I thought. I had been drinking daily for a decade by then, but almost always beginning in the late afternoon. Exceptions included our annual week at the beach, Christmas morning while cooking breakfast, and Thanksgiving morning while

cooking the dinner. Stuff like that. I was writing on Saturday mornings, so drinking wouldn't be an issue. I was wrong. Drinking alcohol did become an issue for my writing. But, that came later.

After a couple of months of Saturday morning writing, the first novel was finished. It was amazing to look at the stack of papers containing nearly a hundred thousand words and realize I'd actually written a book. I decided it wasn't saleable, though. The plot was contrived and unbelievable. I needed to do something else. Despite not being happy with the plot, I did like the characters. One of them was a woman named Tammi. I wanted to get to know her better, so I decided to write a short story with her as the narrator. That story turned into a novel and now I had a plot I liked.

As I was writing about Tammi, a very fortuitous thing happened. One day I was talking to a neighbor named Donna Wentzel. Her college degree was in something like microbiology and she worked as an editor for one of the scientific magazines published in conjunction with a department at the University of Georgia. During the conversation, I mentioned I was writing mystery novels, hoping to be published. She said she loved mysteries and would be happy to look at my writing from an editing standpoint. I jumped at the opportunity and gave her the first few chapters.

A few days later, she returned the manuscript. I thought she'd had an accident and had bled on the pages. She hadn't. Her editing pen held red ink and she'd found a whole bunch of reasons to use it. My first reaction was discouragement. My undergraduate degree was in English, but obviously, I'd wasted my time. Apparently, I couldn't write even a paragraph of decent English. However, as I looked at Donna's work, it became obvious that I was making the same errors over and over. It wasn't bad as it looked at first blush.

When I finished the book, it was time to send query letters to agents and editors. I didn't start at the A's like before. Instead, I researched agents and editors to see who had represented or edited books like mine. The first agent who responded was a woman who sent a full paged, single spaced, critique of my writing. She ended by telling me I had no clue as to the consciousness of a woman and should abandon my effort to write from the first person female perspective. After that, I became E.L. Wyrick and never alluded to my gender. The issue never arose again.

I spent the next two years sending query letters, receiving rejection letters, and rewriting. In 1992, I read a book called *Writing Mysteries*. One of the chapters was written by Ruth Cavin, a well-known mystery editor at St. Martin's Press. After reading her chapter, I decided I'd done all the things she suggested, so I sent a letter to her along with the first three chapters. Three months later, I was sitting in my office at school when I received a phone call. It was Ruth Cavin offering to buy my book.

Wow! I was flying high. I left school right away and bought Champaign on the way home. I popped the cork and Pat and I drank to my success. Ms. Cavin had offered a three thousand dollar advance. I'd asked if I could speak to my agent and she said that was a good idea. Problem was, I didn't have an agent. I'd gone to several writing conferences and an agent named Robin Rue had spoken at one. I liked what she had to say, so I called her. She said she'd be happy to represent me. It's amazing how easy it is to get an agent when you have a contract offer in hand – an easy couple of hundred bucks for them. It wasn't much of an offer, but who knew what the future held?

For me, three thousand dollars was fine. By this time, the incident with the board member was far away in the past with no further ramifications, so my immediate motivation for being published was long gone. Now, I just wanted to gain a foothold in the publishing world.. I figured that once I had something published, I'd be on my way to supporting myself from writing. I planned to write a Tammi Randall series and expand from there.

While I was waiting to hear from agents and editors regarding the novel, I was also writing short stories. Two literary stories were published in small magazines. Even those magazines receive far more submissions than they use, so having those published spurred me on. About the time I heard from Ruth Cavin about my novel, a mystery story I'd written for Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, a national publication, had been accepted.

I was on my way.

My first dip back into reality came when *A Strange and Bitter Crop*, the novel, was published. While *Publisher's Weekly* and *Mystery News* had nice things to say about the book, I learned quickly that St. Martin's didn't do much to publicize many of the books they published. Mysteries, in particular, were their staple and according to what I read, they made their money selling lots of mysteries to libraries. I quickly discovered that if any member of the public was going to find out about the book, I had to arrange for my own publicity.

That set up an immediate conflict. I wanted the book to sell. For it to sell, people had to know about it. That meant I had to be out doing things in public. Schmoozing. I hated schmoozing. I hated idle conversation. I didn't know what to say and was extremely uncomfortable. That is, I was like that unless I had a buzz going – enough alcohol to alleviate the anxiety. Then, I was fine, unless I misjudged and drank too much. Then I embarrassed myself. That tension resulted in a constant struggle to be sure I had enough alcohol to be relaxed, but not too much. It was hard work and I avoided having to do that if I could. Now, I had to do it, like it or not.

I contacted WAGA television in Atlanta to arrange an appearance on the station's morning news program, *Good Day, Atlanta*. It became obvious early in the conversation with the show's producer that just having a novel being published wasn't appealing to her. But, when I mentioned I was a male writing from the first person, female perspective, she became interested.

As the day of my appearance on the television show approached, so did Tropical Storm Alberto. The storm was dumping flood producing rains along its path and was scheduled to hit Atlanta the same morning that I would be on TV. I didn't want severe weather to cause me to miss my chance for the TV appearance, so I made the ninety-minute trip to Atlanta the night before and stayed in a hotel near the studios.

Upon awakening, I learned Alberto had made a U-turn and had headed back south. It had stalled over Macon, about sixty miles south of Atlanta, and record floods were occurring in that area. That turned out to be a good thing for me. With that going on, lots of people were tuning into local TV, instead of the network morning news shows.

As I sat in my hotel room watching the reports of the rampaging rivers, my anxiety grew. I'd made these arrangements because I knew I should. But, the whole process of going on television provided a massive amount of fuel for my anxiety machine. I was fine on the radio, but that was just me and a microphone all alone in a studio. Television was different. Now my stomach was tight and nausea was kicking in. I hated that

feeling. Really, really hated it. Part of that, I think, was because I thought I should be better than that. I shouldn't get all nussed up about a television appearance. I had to do something to relax.

I had my vodka with me, of course, and vodka was good for getting rid of that feeling. I couldn't have too much, though. I'd have to try to time things just right. Drink enough to "take the edge off," but not enough to affect my ability to think. I couldn't let it wear off too soon. That meant drinking enough in the hotel room to get to the proper place – relaxed stomach and sharp enough mind to function well. Then, I had to maintain that level. That meant sips on the way to the studio and in the parking lot and arriving exactly when I was supposed to. To be too early meant my "medicine" would wear off too soon. I had to be sure to remember the mouthwash and soap. By then, I knew it was difficult to get rid of the alcohol odor. Probably impossible. But, I could mitigate it as much as possible.

All that planning and working things out. That's what it was like for more than two decades – a never ending story.

I arrived at the studio at 6:00 a.m., as instructed and was taken into the green room. I was feeling just right. Stomach pretty much relaxed and I seemed to be thinking pretty good. I was OK. Time passed. I sat there. I could feel it happening. The liquor was going away. Unease crept closer. When was this going to happen? A woman came in the room. Turns out she's the make-up woman. She tells me I'm scheduled to go on in the next hour.

That did it. My body was an extremely efficient metabolizer of alcohol. When she told me that, I knew my anxiety defense was doomed. I needed a cigarette. Couldn't smoke in the green room. Couldn't leave the green room. I sat there in agony.

By the time I went on the air, my body was screaming for nicotine and my head was fuzzy from the alcohol being depleted. I did OK. It wasn't horrible. But, it wasn't near what it could have been . . . should have been. A large part of my definition left me when alcohol and nicotine wasn't available. At least, that was true unless I had too much. Too much and my definition could be hideous.

It was always like that. I went to the Southeastern Independent Booksellers Conference in Orlando, Florida. Before going out to mingle, I'd get a good buzz going. I stayed around the smoking areas because when folks are standing around smoking, it's easier to chitchat and I'd talk about my book. Now and again I'd go back to the hotel room to get my "relaxation" level up to what I wanted it to be. One of those smoking area sessions resulted in my being invited to do an hour long show on South Carolina Public Radio a few months later. I drove to Columbia, South Carolina and went through the same struggle as I did at the television station.

After finishing the first novel, I was at work and had a meeting with difficult parents and their child in my office. The parents were awful. I felt sorry for that student. After they left, I told our secretary, "Boy, the best thing for that kid would be to line those parents against the wall and blow them away." I thought about that on the way home and decided that'd make a good short story. I wrote it and sent it to Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. It was about a high school counselor who killed crummy parents. After submitting it a couple of times and rewriting, Janet Hutchings, the magazine's editor, bought it. When it was published, the Atlanta Journal Constitution mentioned it, bringing a few radio interviews.

Good things kept happening. I was a presenter at a writer's conference and ended up sitting next to Janet Hutchings, the editor at Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, at the banquet. She told me she was using my story as a test for hiring new assistant editors. She'd give them several stories to read, and if they didn't pick mine as the one they'd buy, she wouldn't hire them. I was flattered. Things were moving along nicely.

Meanwhile, I had begun the next Tammi Randall novel. When I was writing the first one, I worked steadily, but slowly. I wrote on Saturday mornings only, and it took a few months to finish the first draft. As I was writing it, I knew the odds of being published weren't high, so I felt no urgency. Now, with a sale in hand, I was anxious to get the second one done. Instead of writing on Saturday mornings only, I began writing each night after family obligations were done.

That was a cosmic shift—a fundamental change in the way I was conducting my writing business. Writing in the evening didn't mean I changed anything about my drinking in the evening. Couldn't do that. No way. I'd get home and go straight for the glass, ice, and vodka. By the time I'd sit down to write, I had my normal evening buzz going. The vodka glass sat next to the monitor. Writing every day speeded things nicely and soon I was done with it. It seemed like I spent less time sitting, staring, and thinking and more time tapping the keyboard. The story flowed. Donna did the final editing look and I sent it off to Ruth Cavin.

Ruth Cavin called with the same three thousand dollar deal for my second Tammi Randall novel and I accepted. If I wanted it published, I had no other choice. *A Strange and Bitter Crop*, with no publisher support and no advertising save my efforts, hadn't sold more than a few hundred books. But, St. Martin's was buying another one, so maybe this would be different. That seemed to be the case when I got a call from a person in St. Martin's publicity department. I didn't even know they had one. He said he'd gotten word that my second novel, *Power in the Blood*, would be starred in Kirkus reviews. The review was quite flattering. He indicated there'd be more effort at publicizing this one. I made arrangements to fly to New York to encourage that.

I was to meet with Ruth Cavin and her assistant for lunch. Now, we were getting into the real deal. Lunch in Manhattan with the renowned Ruth Cavin. Before I went, I had a telephone conversation with another author who had begun with Ms. Cavin. She had a very successful career going with another publisher now, but was grateful for the start she had with St. Martins. During the conversation, she told me the editor was a heavy drinker. Good news! In the back of my mind, I knew I would need some help getting through that lunch meeting. No way I could sit there and chit chat stone cold sober. If Ms. Cavin drank alcohol, I wouldn't have to hide my consumption at lunch.

Once in New York, it was time for the meeting. I was to go to the Flat Iron building, home of St. Martins, to join up with Ms. Cavin, and then we'd go to lunch. As I sat in my hotel room waiting, I went through the same machinations I always did. The tense, knotted up stomach was there along with the growing nausea. Gonna have to take the edge off before I leave the hotel room. When I arrived at the proper buzz level, I headed off for the meeting. Problem, is, I'm early. I sat on a bench in a park and could feel the buzz wane. There, just in front of me, is a bar. I rarely went to bars, and never, ever at 11:00 a.m., but there it was. I went in to maintain my buzz, but ended up doing more than maintain. Time had slowed to a standstill, but my anxiety was moving along nicely. I

did more than maintain. I had too many. A bunch too many. I knew it as soon as I walked onto the street, blinking away the bar's darkness.

Oh, well, I thought. Ms. Cavin will understand. According to what that other author had told me, the editor wouldn't likely notice. I arrived at her office and we left for lunch immediately, along with her assistant, Elisabeth. The waiter came and I waited for Ms. Cavin to order a drink. She didn't. Elisabeth didn't either. We talked. I was miles beyond the sobriety line. My mouth didn't want to work right. I couldn't think. My conversation was stupid. I wasn't slurring, stumbling, or falling, but I just couldn't get things right. I was off kilter. I knew it, but could nothing about it. I sat there trying to will all that away, and couldn't. *I just couldn't think.* Lunch didn't last long.

I didn't hear much from Ms. Cavin after that. The publicity promised by the guy who told me about the Kirkus review never happened. I have no idea whatsoever if any of that is connected with my performance at lunch. I just don't know. But, I have my suspicions.

After *Power in the Blood* was published, I was back in New York City for Edgar Week. The Edgar is the mystery writer's Oscar. Some connected to the awards program had called a few months before and asked if I would read from *Power in the Blood* at Barnes and Noble on Broadway as part of the Edgar Week activities. And there I was again, sitting in my hotel room all anxious about reading in New York City. I did it again. Self-medicated and went one, two, maybe twelve drinks too far. Again, I didn't do the obvious drunk stuff, but I wasn't all there, that's for sure.

Alcoholics just don't learn as long as we're still drinking alcohol. We just don't.

I used the knowledge I'd gained about writing and being published to write an article called "The Ten Commandments of Becoming Published." *Writer's Digest* magazine accepted it. I received a call from them saying that they were arranging for a photo shoot and I would be on the magazine's cover. At that time, the cover was always some sort of drawing, or a picture of an object. They said they hadn't had a real person on the cover for many years. I have no idea why I was given that honor.

After the magazine was published, I received even more invitations to speak. One of the invitations was to be a presenter at the Eudora Welty Writers Symposium in Mississippi. They offered a thousand dollars plus expenses for a fifteen-minute speech. But, there was more to it than just that talk. Many social events surrounded this conference and the authors were expected to attend and mingle.

I didn't want to do it. The thought of mingling was terrifying. I knew the moment the lady told me about the social aspect that I'd have to work out the medicating part. It would be tough – trying to time the alcohol and the mingling. This wasn't a one shot deal. It took place over three days. I didn't want the struggle. I wanted to decline.

But, I couldn't turn down the money. My family needed it. Probably more important to me was that if I declined, I'd be flat out admitting alcohol had gotten the best of me. I knew I was an alcoholic by then. Had no doubt. But I was functioning just fine, or so it seemed, so I avoided thinking about it. To decline this opportunity would change all that. If I thought alcohol was affecting my ability to function, I'd have to do something about it. That thought terrified me because the thought of life without alcohol was unimaginable. I had no choice but to accept the invitation. Being a functioning alcoholic doesn't mean having a life absent of angst. Quite the opposite is true. We're flat full of it.

So off I went to Mississippi. As the small plane approached Starkville, my mind kept going back to the problem. Three days of non-stop mingling meant I'd have to maintain

a buzz all the time. I knew I couldn't hide that. No way. I needed to have an excuse for why I smelled of alcohol all the time. By then I knew I couldn't hide it. As the plane landed, a plan came together.

A woman from the conference was waiting for me at the gate. As she drove away from the airport, I commented that I wasn't feeling too well. Pretty awful, as a matter of fact. Felt like I was getting the flu, or something. She said she was sorry. As the conversation moved along, I made sure to include that I've found toddy or two is the best medicine for flu symptoms. She seemed to agree.

OK, now I was set. If I had alcohol on my breath, and I would, it was medicinal. I imagined someone saying, "That guy's a drunk," and someone else saying, "On, no. He's not a drunk. He's coming down with the flu and is doing what he can to get through the conference. Isn't he a dear?"

I used to think laughable stuff like that.

I carried out my plan, maintaining my buzz throughout the activities during the first two days. I was scheduled to speak during the morning program of the third day. Up until then I had balanced my buzz well enough, I thought – enough to stay relaxed, but not enough to get stupid. That changed on the morning of the third day – the morning I was to speak. The auditorium was filled and I was filled with vodka. Too much vodka. The majority of the audience was college students. I tried to tell them what they needed to do to become published. My memories are vague about the whole thing. I don't remember much. But, I do remember the difficulty I had forming words. It was that thinking thing again. I also remember saying something I regretted. It was not something just god-awful – not something that would make news.. But, it was something I wouldn't say if I were sober. I remember a deadly sort of silence after I said it when I expected laughter. I wish I could tell you what it was I said, but I just don't remember. I was too far gone.

The next morning I was on the small plane heading back to Atlanta. The sky was full of storms and we circled for a long time before beginning our approach. My mind was full of storms, too. I retrieved my wallet and took out the \$1000 check I'd been given before leaving. This was in addition to the reimbursement I'd receive for my travel expenses. The word "honorarium" was written on the check.

I wasn't sure of the etymology of the word "honorarium," but I knew I deserved no honor. I'd screwed up the speech. Being fully sober now, I realized the "mingling" part wasn't so great either. I mostly stood around in a stupor, or going outside to smoke cigarettes, and from time to time mumbling something about having the flu.

Honorarium?

I didn't deserve it.

I was a drunk stealing money.

Upon returning home from the conference, I went back to work another short story for Ellery Queen Mystery magazine. I came home from work, poured my vodka, ate dinner, and then sat down to write – the glass of vodka sitting on my desk, as always.. I'd smoke, drink, and type a sentence, then drink some more smoke some more, then type another sentence. Between each sentence, I'd forget what I'd just written, or forget where I was going with the scene, and have to reread the preceding paragraphs through squinted eyes. "Oh, yeah," I'd think, then type another sentence, take another sip of vodka, another drag from the cigarette, then struggle with the next sentence. I spent

months writing that short story. Ellery Queen bought it and that was my last published piece. In fact, that was the last writing I did, period. It was just too hard.

Becoming published is difficult. Zillions have the desire, thousands actually sit down and write, and only a relative handful of people actually sell what they've written. That's particularly true for fiction. Within two years of deciding to write for publication, I'd sold a novel to a major publishing house. In quick succession, my second published novel was well reviewed in national publications. I'd been on the cover of a national magazine. I'd been invited to speak at several conferences. The editor of a national magazine was using my short story as a test for hiring assistant editors. I'd read my work at Barnes and Noble on Broadway.

And, I gave all that away because I couldn't stop drinking alcohol.

As I write these words now, tears come.