

Leaving the Party

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Abstract

Alcohol use is a feature of Canadian society, as is alcoholism, which is currently defined in the DSM-5 as alcohol use disorder (AUD). While statistics may help estimate quantitative AUD data such as disease and all-cause mortality as well as the costs of AUD on government resources, they cannot convey the qualitative suffering AUD inflicts on users, users' family and friends, and even strangers – i.e., innocent bystanders still lose their lives to drunk drivers. The intent of this essay is to weave some AUD data into a non-fiction story that relies heavily on anecdotes from my own personal struggle with AUD, as well as insights gleaned from my family, friends, and coworkers. If statistics cannot sway others away from substance abuse, maybe putting a few faces on a few of those numbers can. I have changed the names, but anyone familiar with Edmonton's bar scene will know who I'm talking about.

September 11, 2024, marked the second anniversary of my divorce and the end of a thirty-five-year relationship. A friend introduced us at a house party one crisp fall evening, and I was smitten. She was incredibly popular, and merely being associated with her added a measure of social relevance this fifteen-year-old had never known. I went from playing Dungeons & Dragons in the activities room to high-fiving jocks in the hallways, going to all the best parties, and, most importantly, finally getting laid. My mother seemed the only one to disapprove of our relationship – she uncovered the evidence while washing my bedsheets. That evidence was vomit and her lecture began with, "Your grandpa was an alcoholic". She recounted the last time Uncle Rick found grandpa in the kitchen sitting in a pile of his own shit and still clutching an empty forty of Jack. Once again, she said, Rick – the eternal enabler – bathed him, dressed him in the least soiled clothes he could find, and drove him to the hospital. Grandpa choked to death on his own puke just a few weeks later. I can't remember her exact words, but I can still summon the image of a gaunt and angry man whose stink of stale booze and acrid sweat contaminated everything in my grandparents' home. I promised my mother I'd be nothing like him, got a job bussing tables at a local restaurant, and continued binging with my high school sweetheart. Her name was Rye.

Disclaimer: to avoid offending anyone's modern sensibilities, or worse – summoning my stinky grandpa's shade to your side – I will now refer to alcoholism like the shrinks do in their DSM-V as "alcohol use disorder" (AUD). AUD is defined as "[a] problematic pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress" (490). You only need to fulfil two out of the following eleven criteria over a twelve-month period to be diagnosed with AUD:

1. Do you often find yourself having more drinks than you originally intended?
 2. Have you tried to cut down?
 3. Are the hangovers affecting your life?
 4. Are you ever obsessed with getting a glass of beer or wine?
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5. Has drinking affected your schooling or work?
6. Has it ever affected your professional or personal relationships?
7. Maybe drinking has interfered with your sports or hobbies?
8. Have you driven a car while intoxicated or operated heavy machinery while hungover?
9. Do you continue drinking despite the nagging suspicion it's becoming a problem?
10. Do you presently drink more alcohol than you did last year?
11. When you take a break from drinking, do you experience sweating, a high pulse, get "the shakes," nausea, anxiety, or insomnia?

If you identified with at least two of these descriptions, congratulations! You just diagnosed yourself with AUD. That settled, let us continue with the tragedy of it all.

When I reached the legal age to serve liquor, I went from bussing to waiting tables, and at nineteen I became a bartender. By "bartender," I mean "vampire." Bartenders work by night and sleep by day. We work while you play and play when you work. If you party on Friday and Saturday, we party on Tuesday and Wednesday. Are you planning to invite your bartender friend to Metallica? Don't bother, she's working. Or maybe you'd like her to watch the New Year's fireworks? There's a one-hundred percent chance she's working. The economics of this unholy covenant means we profane every sabbath and holy day known to man for the chance to make a decent hunk of change. We exchange your money – your life force – for tasty poison. Vampires, indeed, because alcohol is *poison*.

According to Health Canada's 2021 low-risk drinking guidelines, "Any amount of alcohol consumption can have risks to your health," and women and men should consume no more than 2 and 3 standard drinks per day, or 10 and 15 drinks per week, respectively. These guidelines were revised in 2023 by the newly formed Canadian Center on Substance Abuse and Addiction [CCSA], which has determined that no amount of alcohol is safe. Instead, anyone consuming 0-2 standard drinks per week is simply "likely" to avoid negative consequences to others or oneself. Going above 2 drinks increases the odds of causing violence. 3-6 drinks lead to a higher risk of certain cancers, and anything above 7 drinks drastically increases your chances of having a heart attack or a stroke. Anything beyond this radically increases the odds of shitting your pants and choking to death on vomit. By the way, the Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey indicates 23% of you already exceed guideline 1 of 0-2 drinks, and 17% exceed guideline 2 of 3-6.

In their survey of AUD all-death mortality, Alexander Tran et al. estimate that 22,508 Canadians died in 2019 because of AUD. AUD causes all sorts of diseases you never want to meet: "Hello, esophageal cancer, thanks to booze I can't ever speak again!" Two of my ex-customers are living with cirrhosis and are eagerly awaiting someone's untimely death so they can get transplants. I'd cite the odds of them getting a liver from a drunk driving fatality but, according to Mothers Against Drunk Driving Canada (MADD):

There is no current, comprehensive, national data available on the number of Canadians killed or injured in impairment-related crashes... This lack of access to national data on impairment-related crash deaths and injuries has been an ongoing challenge in Canada

for over two decades. MADD Canada is calling on the federal government to address this problem.

This lack of federal data may seem surprising, considering the drag AUD puts on federal, provincial, and municipal finances, but in “Drinking-Driving Fatalities and Consumption of Beer, Wine and Spirits,” Robert E. Mann et al. discovered that MADD has, indeed, helped to make our roads safer. They estimate that while “[t]he introduction in 1969 of Canada’s *per se* law was associated with an 18% reduction in drinking-driver fatality rates... the founding of [MADD] and its predecessor, People to Reduce Impaired Driving Everywhere (PRIDE) resulted in a 19-23% reduction in impaired driving fatality rates” (322). Way to go, moms!

In case you’re wondering, the AUD cocktail is super easy to make. Just add one-quarter alcohol to three-quarters biological, psychological, and sociological processes. First, rub a mint leaf on the inside of a polished chimney glass and fill it with rock ice. Next, pour in a few ounces of Hendrick’s®, mix in a mutation on the GABRA2 gene, a history of child abuse, and a society that encourages drinking culture. Garnish with an increasing alcohol tolerance, complex PTSD, and exposure to alcohol in your childhood home since “[t]he behavior of parents is commonly imitated by children” (Chen et al. 2). Don’t forget to add an eight-inch straw!

But all the studies in the world cannot convey the suffering AUD causes like a personal anecdote can. Consider the time my co-worker Jackie flipped her car on the Yellowhead while driving home drunk. Or when an extremely hungover Shawn fell asleep at the wheel and left behind a grieving fiancée, Katie, who also died of AUD-induced organ failure in December 2024. Or how Misty took his life in 2016, followed by Mark in 2021, and Alan this May – who left behind a girlfriend he didn’t know was pregnant. Especially controversial was the time Kit went missing after a particularly hard bender: her bloated body was discovered three days later in the back of her car, baking in the hot Calgary sun, with her windows rolled to the top.

I know many more, but when people constantly enter and leave your life, you tend to forget names. Besides, a bartender’s memory is like a fruit fly’s; I’ve been trained to remember drink orders until the second they’re made. Or maybe it’s early-onset dementia. What were we talking about? Oh, right. Vampires, poison, and death.

I hate funerals, eulogies, and listening to rites in English, Hindi, Mandarin, and Latin. Tell me about the person in a language we all can understand! Dispense with these pithy platitudes and speak for the dead already. We need words of warning and words of woe, lest we suffer the same fate. But instead of reflecting on the costs of our addictions, we meet up at a bar, clink our glasses together to cheers the living before slamming them onto the bar for the dead. To celebrate their lives, we drink what killed them.

My moment of clarity arrived when I awoke in the hallway in front of my apartment – only on the wrong floor. Someone shook me awake, and as I pulled my face from the carpet and steadied myself against the wall, he exclaimed, “Dude! Your nose is bleeding!” I thanked him for waking me up, opened the stairwell door, and stumbled down the steps to my floor. “You okay?” he called behind me.

“Yes,” I slurred as I crashed into wall after wall all the way down before somehow making it to bed.

Upon waking, I suspected my nose was broken but couldn't tell through the swelling. Too embarrassed to visit my doctor – I knew he'd ask some uncomfortable questions – I let it heal on its own. I searched my memories for an account of the previous night's events, but all I remembered was a night of bar-hopping that ended with an acquaintance walking me to a cab.

Coworkers welcomed my bruised face and black eyes with friendly jibes the next night; we all enjoy a good drinking yarn and word travels fast when you all have the same schedules and go to the same bars. But I wasn't there ten minutes before waves of nausea overtook me. I fled to the staff washroom and found some relief by lying on the cold floor tiles. I asked a cook to grab the manager, who I then begged to send me home. I know hangovers, and though I surely was, this was something else entirely. I now suspect I was in shock from a broken nose; if you look closely, you can see how it bends a little to the right.

On the morning of September 11, 2022, I awoke hungover from a particularly raucous celebration when a thought leapt unbidden into my mind: *You can't drink your way back to your twenties*. That evening, I informed the manager that I was giving my two weeks unless he promised to fire me if I ever had another drop of liquor, in or out of our bar. He looked at me sideways and asked, “You sure...?” But I was adamant. We shook on it, and I am two years sober. I hope he'll honour the agreement if I ever fall off the wagon, but it's our job to get shitloads of money out of chumps like you and me.

Before you go, would you like to add an 18% gratuity?

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