



# ALCOHOL IS A SNEAKY, UNDERHAND BASTARD

ONE WOMAN'S HEART-RENDING ACCOUNT OF LOVING  
A MAN WHO IS DRINKING HIMSELF TO DEATH

**Y**our life is going well. And then WHAM, along comes some gut-wrenching news that rocks you to the core. I receive a call to say my ex is ill in hospital. *Seriously* ill. The news is not entirely unexpected. He has been a train wreck waiting to happen – I knew he would crash, it was just a matter of when. Now he is slumped in a hospital bed, broken, mumbling and confused. In the beds around him there are others, also incoherent – and their confused families. They lie like so many cracked and empty shells, potential spilt and wasted, hope evaporated.

Alcoholism may not look, act or sound like a disease, but it is one, and these

patients are very sick indeed. The medics are doing their best to piece them back together. As I observe my former husband lying in urine-stained sheets, memories flood back in waves of pity, resentment, anger and frustration. I swallow hard and walk out of the ward so he can't see my tears. He must feel bad enough without the ignominy of having his ex looking on pityingly – no matter what has transpired between us. But then he probably doesn't know I am here.

**The partners of alcoholics know the disease is a malevolent, beguiling lover, leaving little room for any other relationship.** In my marriage I was never going to be the victor. For 22 years, booze won, hands down. There was no point in nagging or cajoling.

For alcoholics the disease is like an earworm, a nig-

gling tune repeating itself in your head, like those advertising jingles you beg others not to hum. Imagine swinging your legs over the side of the bed in the grey dawn, it playing in your head. Or retiring at day's end, praying for peace, but in the darkness it is there, demanding your attention. Or on a dazzling sunny day, when you're playing with your children, it emits its unrelenting drone. At first it can be quieted with a drink or two, but then it takes a few more, and then just another – and another for the road.

Watching someone slowly kill themselves is painful. It has a terrible melody of its own: from anger to pain, denial to worry. You make excuses, cover up, are lied to by him and tell lies on his behalf.

Some say alcoholics are wired differently. For many, it's an inherited predisposition, but it can also be triggered by factors such as stress and depression. The irony is that while those suffering from depression may turn to alcohol for relief, it's also a depressant, which only sinks the sufferer deeper into the quagmire. Alcohol is a sneaky, underhand bastard like that.

Alcoholism is a progressive disease. One day, the alcoholic will wake to find there is no more right and wrong, no relationship more important than the next drink, no choice about whether to drink or not.

**Alcohol has always been part of the** Australian way of life, going back to the First Fleet, which carried 1600 litres of rum and 1350 litres of brandy. It lubricates the wheels of our modern economy – liquor retailing had a turnover of \$10.75 billion in the year to April – but it also has hefty costs: increased incidences of cancers; lower life expectancy; drink-driving accidents and deaths; violence and crime; policing and court costs; divorce; job loss; loss of productivity; financial problems... I could go on.

Apart from tobacco, alcohol is the most preventable cause of hospitalisation and drug-related death. Scientific reports variously cite – depending on what consequences the researchers include – an annual cost to our society of between \$15 billion and \$36 billion.

But can you calculate how much a life lived well costs? What is the dollar value of death in a family? And are dispassionate calculations and ethical debates helpful to anyone other than Canberra “suits” working in the Treasury? What is a dollar cost of pain and suffering, mental distress, the loss of quality of life caused by someone else's drinking? What about quantifying feelings such as safety and security?

**I wonder what the conservative estimate of** \$15 billion in social costs means to Victoria. She is a mature, intelligent, skilled professional whose partner of 26 years is in the final stages of alcohol disease. He drinks four litres of wine each day, which she purchases. It is easier than trying to fight him about it, or for him to buy his own. He no longer works and doesn't drive. I ask what induces her to stay with a man who verbally, and sometimes physically, abuses her. Is it pity? Love? Guilt? “I am pragmatic,” she says. “As the sole breadwinner, I pay the mortgage and support us both.” If she leaves, she will have to buy him out, which she can't afford. As I talk to Victoria on the phone, I hear a deep voice mumbling in the background. Victoria tells him that she is on a call and will be with him in a minute. More mumbling, then suddenly, urgently, she says “I have to go...”

A week later I find out what happened: he overheard our conversation, became aggressive and wouldn't give Victoria any privacy. It's a common occurrence. “I would love to have a social life, but I can't have people here. If I go out, I can't take him



## AUSTRALIANS ONLY ADMIT TO DRINKING HALF THE ALCOHOL THAT'S SOLD



Victoria admits she is co-dependent – she's as reliant on him for a roof over her head as he is on her for his booze. Don't judge her. Until you have been where she is, how would you know what you would do, or how you would react?

**Part of the problem is that few people know what** constitutes a standard drink. It's about a 100ml glass of wine. Go to the kitchen right now and measure 100ml: it's not much. The National Health and Medical Research Council's guidelines state that for healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of long-term harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

In April, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) published its Annual Alcohol Poll, which revealed 23 per cent of Australians can't stop drinking once they start, 31 per cent feel guilty or remorseful after drinking, and 67 per cent think it's OK to get drunk. The greater the quantity of alcohol consumed, the less likely people are to perceive that they have a problem. FARE notes: “Australians only admit to drinking half the alcohol that's sold”.

As a society, we think of people with alcohol problems as those “others”, down and out, intractable, dealt with by social welfare agencies, moved on by police, overnighting in the lockup. Or the binge-drinking youths in the nightclub precincts. It's not our problem. But the reality is quite different. Alcoholism directly and indirectly affects nearly every Australian in every walk of life – including the professional worker who drinks quietly and steadily at home in

with me. His behaviour is embarrassing.” She describes her existence as one of utter isolation; she honestly hopes that he will drink himself into oblivion as soon as possible. “And when that happens you will hear me singing *I'm Free* [by The Who] in top voice. And I don't care what people think.”

men, and often more than one at once – they would take it in turns – just for the free drinks they gave her. These days she controls her problem, tries to stick to 15 standard drinks a week; her trouble is that she doesn't have that inner switch that tells her when to stop, and sometimes after work she needs a bigger “reward” so she can face the next day at the office.

Later that evening, I sit in a suburban church hall with a group of women who live with alcoholics. Everyone swears nothing said in the room will be repeated outside. It is Al-Anon, a support group for families and friends of alcoholics. Each woman has a story – of love, hate, co-dependency and entrapment. The pain in the room is palpable. When I leave, I feel sad, and grateful that I escaped that life.

**Relations with my ex have been difficult. Even so,** news of his hospitalisation is hard. For anyone with a smallest glimmer of compassion, to hear that a once loved individual has descended into an abyss of self-abuse and neglect is heart-rending. He was found alone, the doors locked against a prying world, a recluse to his neighbours, with little apart from a dismantled motorcycle engine and an empty bottle of meths in his house. No food, no money, few home comforts. He lay in a soiled bed, the victim of a stroke, powerless, alone.

I compose myself and gently stroke his hair. He opens his eyes, piss-yellow and bloodshot; a shadow of recognition passes over his face. Memories of the arguments fade, and I recall instead his first kiss in the dark cavern of a London train station on a freezing night. The nights of passion snuggled up in our single bed, all we could afford. His cheeky, wicked humour. A good-looking man, fit, strong, intelligent. This man, I once loved.

The man in front of me is confused and mumbling. His hands shake; his body is deformed and distended. His kidneys are failing. The doctors say he has alcohol dementia. His legs are useless. He tugs at his hospital gown, as if trying to prise it away from his body. He pulls, irritated, at his incontinence pad.

Yes, we have a problem with alcohol in Australia. And it is costing us dearly. ●

All names have been changed for privacy reasons.