



# The Drunkard's Gait

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**PEOPLE HERE CALL ME "MRS. BAUER."**

In the Midwest, where I used to live, everyone used first names. I moved here to the Northeast expecting to find a riot of openness and artsy liberalism — too many years of watching New York sitcom characters discuss their body parts, I suppose. Instead I feel as if I've time-warped into a Jane Austen novel. Because I have children and a professional job, I must also have a title. And not only do people insist on calling me "Mrs.," they also ask, with no apparent embarrassment, where my husband is. As if they're certain I'll provide a logical explanation for his absence: "He's researching the effect of cosmic rays on arctic wildlife," or, "He's running his company's satellite office in Spain."

Sometimes I tell them my husband is dead. More often I say he's working out of town. Or that he's ill and in a hospital receiving treatment. None of these things is true. Or maybe one of them is. They all could be.

Once, for no reason I can name other than that I was tired of making up stories, I told the woman who pours my coffee each morning at Starbucks that my husband is an alcoholic. This was a mistake — not so much because it was an inappropriate thing to say (though, given the slim link between us, it certainly was) but because the minute I said it, she thought she understood.

Her eyes peered out at me from under her green visor. She nodded and put her hand on my arm. "My uncle," she said. "Once my cousins could drive, they used to have to pick him up at bars and then go looking for his car the next morning."

When I tried to pay for my coffee, she waved the money away. “I’ll be praying for you, honey.” She wore a gold crucifix the size of my thumb, and she held it up, like evidence. “Praying that husband of yours comes to his senses and dries out.”

I thanked her, and I meant it. She was kind. She also reminded me why “the truth,” or at least this simplified version of it, is as misleading as any lie I might dream up. She thought the problem was the alcohol, the drinking itself. And, like so many others, this woman envisioned a cure. Abstinence. Simple cause and effect: if he dried out, he would become the man, the husband, the father he was meant to be.

I used to believe that, too. Fifteen years ago, I stood in front of a judge — slightly nauseated from nerves and the sweet scent of flowers and a touch of what would later turn out to be morning sickness — and pledged my life to this man, who was five months sober after a decade of drinking. I believed in him and his sobriety with a zealotry I can only describe as an addiction.

**HE HAD HIS FIRST DRINK AT TWELVE.** The adopted son of two moderate drinkers and the biological child of a violent, lifelong alcoholic, my husband drank daily in high school. When he entered college he became a competitive drinker. It was like a sport, and he was good at it. He went through majors one after another, failing out of programs in forestry, engineering, and education. By the time I met him, he’d been in college eight years and had a transcript that, when printed on continuous dot-matrix paper, was more than two feet long.

He knew a little bit about everything: European history, quantum physics, Islam. He was like a man who’d wandered out of the pages of a Hemingway short story — tanned, strong, with just enough injuries to show that he’d lived. He’d wrecked his hearing with loud concerts and rifle shots; his nose had been broken twice, once in a fight and once in a motorcycle accident.

Of course he drank too much. I could see it from the moment we began dating. But it was part of who he was, like the silver stripes in his beard, though he was only twenty-five. Many people I knew back then drank heavily. It’s what we did: sitting in the blue haze of campus bars and passing joints — beneath the table, as a courtesy to the owner, whose policy was that he didn’t mind smelling our pot, but he didn’t want to see it. And since college I’d seen dozens of my peers get up off their bar stools and become parents and business owners and PTA presidents. That’s what I imagined for us. That’s what I wanted.

I’ve since heard that 8 percent of Americans develop a drinking problem at some point in their lives, but most of them beat it. So I wasn’t crazy: There are literally millions of people who have gone from bleary, beer-soaked college days to marriages and houses and steady jobs. Drinking was like a bacterial infection they outlasted or cured. They came through relatively unscathed.

My husband’s alcoholism was different. It behaved more like a virus, with its own complex design and a nearly human will. Whatever palliative was prescribed, it would adapt and survive.

As a teenager I’d read Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and I’d fallen in love with quixotic, drunken Johnny Nolan, his off-kilter charm and glinting wit. Smith captured a whiff of the sot’s real stink and squalor — his random disappearances, spendthrift ways, and irremediably childlike view. But she didn’t give a fair and accurate picture of the chaos. Her Johnny was predictable in his unpredictability: he sang, he drank, he lost jobs, he drank more, he dreamed of stardom, he drank still more. Finally he died of exposure while wandering the cold streets on a three-day drunk. The story was neat in its way. The problem, clearly, was alcohol.

To be fair, Smith was working with a character who needed limitable traits in order to fit on the page, and a certain degree of consistency to make him believable. My husband possessed neither limits nor consistency. If he had — if the problem were just the booze, the hangovers, the sloppy drunkenness, the money wasted, the rages and nightmares and entire weekends of forgotten sins — I’m certain we’d still be together. After all, I love him. I could have handled all that.

But our story is different.

**FOR A LONG TIME AFTER WE MARRIED**, my husband was stone sober but erratic. He would disappear some weekends and come back looking haggard and worn, his skin a dead shade of gray, but he never stumbled or smelled of booze. It was as if he’d gone to do battle in a place where the fallout wouldn’t hurt us. He’d go on spending sprees he barely remembered — until the credit-card bills came. He’d drive highways he didn’t know to places he’d never been until he literally ran out of gas and had to be rescued by a twosome I referred to as “A to the fifth power”: his AA sponsor and a tow truck from AAA.

Five years passed before the “slips” began. He went on random benders, almost always in response to something small but insoluble: coffee spilled all over his pants on the way into a business meeting; slow, heavy rain on a day that he was supposed to work outside. But his drinking didn’t cause him to miss work or family events or our children’s concerts and plays. And, inevitably, he would sober up and get back to the business at hand, rising out of each self-pitying drunk with a quiet grace.

It wasn’t the liquor itself that ruined him, or us. It was as if the impaired judgment and distorted reasoning of drunkenness became, at some point, permanent. And lying — a skill he’d learned early and well to hide the drinking, first from his parents and then from me — became the single constant in his emotional life. Add these things together, and we never had a chance.

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