My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling, slumped and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother’s trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue as long as memory holds.

In the perennial present of memory, I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey, the cans of beer disguised in paper bags. His Adam’s apple bobs, the liquid gurgles, he wipes the sandy-haired back of a hand over his lips, and then, his bloodshot gaze bumping into me, he stashes the bottle or can inside his jacket, under the workbench, between two bales of hay, and we both pretend the moment has not occurred.

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“What’s up, buddy?” he says, thick-tongued and edgy.

“Sky’s up,” I answer, playing along.

“And don’t forget prices,” he grumbles. “Prices are always up. And taxes.”

In memory, his white 1951 Pontiac with the stripes down the hood and the Indian head on the snout lurches to a stop in the driveway; or it is the 1956 Ford station wagon, or the 1963 Rambler shaped like a toad, or the sleek 1969 Bonneville that will do 120 miles per hour on straightaways; or it is the robin’s-egg-blue pickup, new in 1980, battered in 1981, the year of his death. He climbs out, grinning dangerously, unsteady on his legs, and we children interrupt our game of catch, our building of snow forts, our picking of plums, to watch in silence as he weaves past us into the house, where he drops into his overstuffed chair and falls asleep. Shaking her head, my mother stabs out a cigarette he has left smoldering in the ashtray. All evening, until our bedtimes, we tiptoe past him, as past a snoring dragon. Then we curl fearfully in our sheets, listening. Eventually he wakes with a grunt, Mother slings accusations at him, he snarks back, she yells, he growls, their voices clashing. Before long, she retreats to their bedroom, sobbing—not from the blows of fists, for he never strikes her, but from the force of his words.

Left alone, our father prowls the house, thumping into furniture, rummaging in the kitchen, slamming doors, turning the pages of the newspaper with a savage crackle, muttering back at the late-night drivel from television. The roof might fly off, the walls might buckle from the pressure of his rage. Whatever my brother and sister and mother may be thinking on their own rumpled pillows, I lie there hating him, loving him, fearing him, knowing I have failed him. I tell myself he drinks to ease the ache that gnaws at his belly, an ache I should
be able to relieve by doing all my chores, earning A's in school, winning baseball games, fixing the broken washer and the burst pipes, bringing in the money to fill his empty wallet. He would not hide the green bottles in his toolbox, would not sneak off to the barn with a lump under his coat, would not fall asleep in the daylight, would not roar and fume, would not drink himself to death, if only I were perfect.

I am forty-four, and I know full well now that my father was an alcoholic, a man consumed by disease rather than by disappointment. What had seemed to me a private grief is in fact, of course, a public scourge. In the United States alone, some ten or fifteen million people share his ailment, and behind the doors they slam in fury or disgrace, countless other children tremble. I comfort myself with such knowledge, holding it against the throb of memory like an ice pack against a bruise. Other people have keener sources of grief: poverty, racism, rape, war. I do not wish to compete to determine who has suffered most. I am only trying to understand the corrosive mixture of helplessness, responsibility, and shame that I learned to feel as the son of an alcoholic. I realize now that I did not cause my father's illness, nor could I have cured it. Yet for all this grown-up knowledge, I am still ten years old, my own son's age, and as that boy I struggle in guilt and confusion to save my father from pain.

Consider a few of our synonyms for drunk: tipsy, tight, pickled, soured, and plowed; stoned and stewed, lubricated and inebriated, juiced and slurred; three sheets to the wind, in your cups, out of your mind, under the table; lit up, tanked up, wiped out; besotted, blotto, bombed, and buzzed; plastered, polluted, putrefied; loaded or looped, boozed, woozy, fuddled, or smashed; crocked and shit-faced, corked and pissed, snookered and sloshed.

It is a mostly humorous lexicon, as the lore that deals with drunks—in jokes and cartoons, in plays, films, and television skits—is largely comic. Aunt Matilda nips elderberry wine from the sideboard and burps politely during supper. Uncle Fred slouches to the table glassy-eyed, wearing a lampshade for a hat and murmuring, "Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker." Inspired by cocktails, Mrs. Somebody recounts the events of her day in a fuzzy dialect, while Mr. Somebody nibbles her ear and croons a bawdy song. On the sofa with Boyfriend, Daughter Somebody giggles, licking gin from her lips, and loosens the bows in her hair. Junior knocks back some brews with his chums at the Leopard Lounge and stumbles home to the wrong house, wonders foggily why he cannot locate his pajamas, and crawls naked into bed with the ugliest girl in school. The family dog slurs from a neglected martini and wobbles to the nursery, where he vomits in Baby's shoe.

It is all great fun. But if in the audience you notice a few laughing faces turn grim when the drunk lurches onstage, don't be surprised, for these are the children of alcoholics. Over the grinning mask of Dionysus, the leering face of Bacchus, these children cannot help seeing the bloated features of their own parents. Instead of laughing, they wince, they mourn. Instead of celebrating the drunk as one freed from constraints, they pity him as one enslaved. They refuse to believe in vino veritas, having seen their befuddled parents skid away from truth toward folly and oblivion. And so these children bite their lips until the lush stagger into the wings.

My father, when drunk, was neither funny nor honest; he was pathetic, frightening, deceitful. There seemed to be a leak in him somewhere, and he poured in booze to keep from draining dry. Like a torture victim who refuses to squeal, he would never admit that he had touched a drop, not even in his last year, when he seemed to be dissolving in alcohol before our very eyes. I never knew him to lie about anything, ever, except about this one ruinous fact. Drowsy, clumsy, unable to fix a bicy-
screwdriver or crescent wrenches, and spied a gleaming six-pack among the tools. Playing tag, we darted around the house just in time to see him sway on the rear stoop and heave a finished bottle into the woods. In his good-night kiss we smelled the cloying sweetness of Clorets, the mints he chewed to camouflage his dragon’s breath.

I can summon up that kiss right now by recalling Theodore Roethke’s lines about his own father:

    The whiskey on your breath
    Could make a small boy dizzy;
    But I hung on like death;
    Such waltzing was not easy.

Such waltzing was hard, terribly hard, for with a boy’s scruffy arms I was trying to hold my tipsy father upright.

For years, the chief source of those incriminating bottles and cans was a grimy store a mile from us, a cinder-block place called Sly’s, with two gas pumps outside and a mangy dog asleep in the window. Inside, on rusty metal shelves or in wheezing coolers, you could find pop and Pepsicles, cigarette cases, potato chips, canned soup, raunchy postcards, fishing gear, Twinkies, wine, and beer. When Father drove anywhere on errands, Mother would send us along as guards, warning us not to let him out of our sight. And so with one or more of us on board, Father would cruise up to Sly’s, pump a dollar’s worth of gas or plumb the tires with air, and then, telling us to wait in the car, he would head for the doorway.

Dutiful and panicky, we cried, “Let us go with you!”

“No,” he answered. “I’ll be back in two shakes.”

“Please!”

“No!” he roared. “Don’t you budge or I’ll jerk a knot in your tails!”

So we stayed put, kicking the seats, while he ducked inside. Often, when he had parked the car at a careless angle, we gazed in through the window and saw Mr. Sly fetching down from the shelf behind the cash register two green pints of Gallo wine. Father swigged one of them right there at the counter, stuffed the other in his pocket, and then out he came, a bulge in his coat, a flustered look on his reddened face.

Because the mom and pop who ran the dump were neighbors of ours, living just down the tar-blistered road, I hated them all the more for poisoning my father. I wanted to sneak in their store and smash the bottles and set fire to the place. I also hated the Gallo brothers, Ernest and Julio, whose jovial faces beamed from the labels of their wine, labels I would find, torn and curled, when I burned the trash. I noted the Gallo brothers’ address in California and studied the road atlas to see how far that was from Ohio, because I meant to go out there and tell Ernest and Julio what they were doing to my father, and then, if they showed no mercy, I would kill them.

While growing up on the back roads and in the country schools and cramped Methodist churches of Ohio and Tennessee, I never heard the word alcoholic, never happened across it in books or magazines. In the nearby towns, there were no addiction-treatment programs, no community mental-health centers, no Alcoholics Anonymous chapters, no therapists.

Left alone with our grievous secret, we had no way of understanding Father’s drinking except as an act of will, a deliberate folly or cruelty, a moral weakness, a sin. He drank because he chose to, pure and simple. Why our father, so playful and competent and kind when sober, would choose to ruin himself and punish his family we could not fathom.

Our neighborhood was high on the Bible, and the Bible was hard on drunkards. “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink,” wrote Isaiah.

“The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they err in vision, they stumble in giving judgment. For all tables are full of vomit, no place is without filthiness.” We children had seen those fouled tables at the local truck
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stop where the notorious boozers hung out, our father occasionally among them. “Wine and new wine take away the understanding,” declared the prophet Hesed. We had also seen evidence of that in our father, who could multiply seven-digit numbers in his head when sober but when drunk could not help us with fourth-grade math. Proverbs warned: “Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things.” Woe, woe.

Dismaying often, these biblical drunkards stirred up trouble for their own kids. Noah made fresh wine after the flood, drank too much of it, fell asleep without any clothes on, and was glimpsed in the buff by his son Ham, whom Noah promptly cursed. In one passage—it was so shocking we had to read it under our blankets with flashlights—the patriarch Lot fell down drunk and slept with his daughters. The sins of the fathers set their children’s teeth on edge.

Our ministers were fond of quoting St. Paul’s pronouncement that drunkards would not inherit the kingdom of God. These grave preachers assured us that the wine referred to in the Last Supper was in fact grape juice. Bible and sermons and hymns combined to give us the impression that Moses should have brought down from the mountain another stone tablet, bearing the Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not drink.

The scariest and most illuminating Bible story apropos of drunkards was the one about the lunatic and the wine. We knew it by heart: When Jesus climbed out of his boat one day, this lunatic came charging up from the graveyard, stark naked and filthy, frothing at the mouth, so violent that he broke the strongest chains. Nobody would go near him. Night after day for years, this madman had been wailing among the tombs and bruising himself with stones. Jesus took one look at him and said, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” for he could see that the lunatic was possessed by demons. Meanwhile, some hogs were conveniently rooting near-by. “If we have to come out,” begged the demons, “at least let us go into those swine.” Jesus agreed, the unclean spirits entered the hogs, and the hogs raced straight off a cliff and plunged into a lake. Hearing the story in Sunday school, my friends thought mainly of the pigs. (How big a splash did they make? Who paid for the lost pork?) But I thought of the redeemed lunatic, who bathed himself and put on clothes and calmly sat at the feet of Jesus, restored—so the Bible said—to “his right mind.”

When drunk, our father was clearly in his wrong mind. He became a stranger, as fearful to us as any graveyard lunatic, not quite frothing at the mouth but fierce enough, quick-tempered, explosive; or else he grew maudlin and weepy, which frightened us nearly as much. In my boyhood despair, I reasoned that maybe he wasn’t to blame for turning into an ogre: Maybe, like the lunatic, he was possessed by demons.

If my father was indeed possessed, who would exorcise him? If he was a sinner, who would save him? If he was ill, who would cure him? If he suffered, who would ease his pain? Not ministers or doctors, for we could not bring ourselves to confide in them; not the neighbors, for we pretended they had never seen him drunk; not Mother, who fused and pleaded but could not budge him; not my brother and sister, who were only kids. That left me. It did not matter that 1, too, was only a child, and a bewildered one at that. I could not excuse myself.

On first reading a description of delirium tremens—in a book on alcoholism I smuggled from a university library—I thought immediately of the frothing lunatic and the frenzied swine. When I read stories or watched films about grisly metamorphoses—Dr. Jekyll becoming Mr. Hyde, the mild husband changing into a werewolf, the kindly neighbor inhabited by a brutal alien—I could not
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**The "New" PLO Or: Can the Leopard Change its Spots?**

After more than 20 years of ostracism by most of the civilized world, Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, has finally uttered the "magic words" demanded by the U.S. It didn't come easy, and he didn't get it quite right. But it was good enough for Secretary of State George Schultz who, "the words" having been spoken, declared the willingness of the U.S. to talk with the PLO. One wonders whether that surprising opening will bring peace in the Middle East any closer to realization.

**What are the facts?**

- Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger hastened major concessions from Israel, promised that the U.S. would not deal with the PLO unless it fulfilled two conditions: (1) it would accept U.N. Resolution 242 and 238; (2) it would recognize Israel's "existence". Congress added a third condition, namely that the PLO would renounce terrorism. Finally, after 20 years of ostracism by most of the civilized world, Yasser Arafat, as spokesman for the PLO, did make those statements. Secretary Schultz decided therefore that he must establish contact with the PLO. Only a week earlier, the Secretary had refused Arafat a visa to enter the United States, because of his personal association with and personal responsibility for widespread terrorism all over the world.

- What are the goals of the PLO, and is it likely that anything has changed by the uttering of those three sentences? The PLO is a terror organization, created in 1964 by the Arab League. It has only one aim: the destruction of the State of Israel through force and violence. Any apparent deviation from this single-minded aim is a temporary tactical maneuver.

- The basic charter of the PLO is the so-called "Palestinian National Covenant." Its main theme is that the State of Israel has no right whatever to exist. It states clearly that "Palestine...is an indivisible part of the Arab homeland," and that "the Arab-Palestinian people...reject all solutions that substitute for the total liberation of Palestine." Those PLO and Arab leaders who have from time to time ventured to propose a less intransigent approach have invariably paid with their lives for such deviation from PLO orthodoxy.

- The recent unilateral declaration by the PLO of a "Palestinian State with its capital in Jerusalem" on territory administered by and under control of Israel is an attempt in that direction. The PLO was founded long before Israel's declaration of the pueblo (the "West Bank") and the Gaza Strip. Its avowed purpose was then, has always been and continues to be, the establishment of a Palestinian state, but the destruction of Israel proper.

Can the leopard change its spots? It does not seem likely. And it does not seem likely that the PLO, engaged in unrelenting terror since its creation 24 years ago, could suddenly become a factor for peace, just because of the intonations of a few "magic phrases." It is comforting to think that peace in the Middle East can be achieved by bestowing respectability on the PLO. But the only way to bring about peace in the Middle East is by direct negotiations between Israel and representatives of the displaced peoples of the administered territories, as agreed in the Camp David Accords, a period of autonomy, after which the final status and territory will be decided by the people involved. The PLO cannot be a party to the peace process, because its charter calls for war and destruction and because terror cannot exist together.

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help but see my own father's mutation from sober to drunk. Even today, knowing better, I am attracted by the demonic theory of drink, for when I recall my father's transformation, the, emergence of his ugly second self, I find it easy to believe in being possessed by unclean spirits. We never knew which version of Father would come home from work, the true or the tainted, nor could we guess how far down the slope toward cruelty he would slide.

How far a man could slide we gauged by observing our back-road neighbors—the out-of-work miners who had dragged their families to our corner of Ohio from the desolate hollows of Appalachia, the tightfisted farmers, the surly mechanics, the balled and broken men. There was, for example, whiskey-soaked Mr. Jenkins, who beat his wife and kids so hard we could hear their screams from the road. There was Mr. Lavo, the wino, who fell asleep smoking time and again, until one night his disgust- ed wife bundled up the children and went outside and left him in his easy chair to burn; he awoke on his own, staggered out coughing into the yard, and pounded her flat while the children looked on and the shack turned to ash. There was the truck driver, Mr. Sampson, who tripped over his son's tricycle one night while drunk and got mad, jumped into his semi, and drove away, shifting through the dozen gears, and never came back. We saw the bruised children of these fathers slump onto our school bus, we saw the abandoned children huddle in the pews at church, we saw the stunned and battered mothers begging for help at our doors.

Our own father never beat us, and don't think he beat Mother, but he threatened often. The Old Testament Yahweh was not more terrible in His rage. Eyes blazing, voice booming, Father would pull out his belt and swear to give us a whipping, but he never followed through, never needed to, because we could imagine it so vividly. He shoved us, pawed us with the back of his hand, not to injure just to clear a space. I can see him grabbing Mother by the hair as she cowers on a chair during a nightly quarrel. He twists her neck back until...
she gapes up at him, and then he lifts over her skull a glass quart bottle of milk, the milk spilling down his forearm, and he yells at her. “Say just one more word, one goddamn word, and I’ll shut you up!” I fear she will prick him with her sharp tongue, but she is terrified into silence, and so am I, and the leaking bottle quivers in the air, and milk seeps through the red hair of my father’s uplifted arm, and the entire scene is there to this moment, the head jerked back, the club raised.

When the drink made him weepy, Father would pack, kiss each of us children on the head, and announce from the front door that he was moving out. “Where to?” we demanded, fearful each time that he would leave for good, as Mr. Simpson had roared away for good in his diesel truck. “Someplace where I won’t get hounded every minute,” Father would answer, his jaw quivering. He stabbed a look at Mother, who might say, “Don’t run into the ditch before you get there,” or “Good riddance,” and then he would slink away. Mother watched him go with arms crossed over her chest, her face closed like the lid on a box of snakes. We children bawled. Where could he go? To the truck stop, that den of iniquity? To one of those dark, ratty flop houses in town? Would he wind up sleeping under a railroad bridge or on a park bench or in a cardboard box, mummied in rags like the bums we had seen on our trips to Cleveland and Chicago? We bawled and bawled, wondering if he would ever come back.

He always did come back, a day or a week later, but each time there was a sliver less of him.

In Kafka’s Metamorphosis, which opens famously with Gregor Samsa waking up from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into an insect, Gregor’s family keep reassuring themselves that things will be just fine again “when he comes back to us.” Each time alcohol transformed our father we held out the same hope, that he would really and truly come back to us, our authentic father, the tender and playful and competent man, and then all things would be fine. We had grounds for such hope. After his tearful departures and chapfallen returns, he would sometimes go weeks, even months, without drinking. Those were glad times. Every day without the furtive glint of bottles, every meal without a fight, every bedtime without sobbing encouraged us to believe that such bliss might go on forever.

Mother was fooled by such a hope all during the forty-odd years she knew Greeley Ray Sanders. Soon after she met him in a Chicago delicatessen on the eve of World War II and fell for his butter-melting Mississippi drawl and his wavy red hair, she learned that he drank heavily. But then so did a lot of men. She would soon coax or scold him into breaking the nasty habit. She would point out to him how ugly and foolish it was, this bleary drinking, and then he would quit. He refused to quit during their engagement, however, still refused during the first years of marriage, refused until my older sister came along. The shock of fatherhood sobered him, and he remained sober through my birth at the end of the war and right on through until we moved in 1951 to the Ohio arsenal. The arsenal had more than its share of alcoholics, drug addicts, and other varieties of escape artists. There I turned six and started school and woke into a child’s flickering awareness, just in time to see my father begin sneaking swigs in the garage.

He sobered up again for most of a year at the height of the Korean War, to celebrate the birth of my brother. But aside from that dry spell, his only breaks from drinking before I graduated from high school were just long enough to raise and then dash our hopes. Then during the fall of my senior year—the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when it seemed that the nightly explosions at the munitions dump and the nightly rages in our household might spread to engulf the globe—Father collapsed. His liver, kidneys, and heart all conked out. The doctors saved him, but only by a hair. He stayed in the hospital for
weeks, going through a withdrawal so
terrible that Mother would not let us
visit him. If he wanted to kill himself,
the doctors solemnly warned him, all
he had to do was hit the bottle again.
One binge would finish him.

Father must have believed them,
for he stayed dry the next fifteen
years. It was an answer to prayer,
Mother said, it was a miracle. I
believe it was a reflex of fear, which
he sustained over the years through
courage and pride. He knew a man
could die from drink, for his brother Roscoe
had. We children never laid eyes on
doomed Uncle Roscoe, but in the
stories Mother told us he became a
fairy-tale figure, like a boy who took
the wrong turn in the woods and
was gobbled up by the wolf.

The fifteen-year dry spell came to
an end with Father's retirement in
the spring of 1978. Like many men, he
gave up his identity along with his
job. One day he was a boss at the fac-
tory, with a brass plate on his door and
a reputation to uphold; the next day
he was a nobody at home. He and
Mother were leaving Ontario, the last
of the many places to which his job
had carried them, and they were mov-
ing to a new house in Mississippi, his
childhood stomping ground. As a boy
in Mississippi, Father sold Coca-Cola
during dances while the moonshiners
peddled their brew in the parking lot;
as a young blade, he fought in bars and
in the ring, winning a state Golden
Gloves championship; he gambled at
poker, hunted pheasant, raced motor-
cycles and cars, played semiprofes-
sional baseball, and, along with all his
buddies—in the Black Cat Saloon,
behind the cotton gin, in the woods
—he drank hard. It was a perilous youth
to dream of recovering.

After his final day of work, Mother
drove on ahead with a car full of bego-
nias and violets, while Father stayed
behind to oversee the packing. When
the van was loaded, the sweaty mov-
ers broke open a six-pack and offered
him a beer.

"Let's drink to retirement!" they
crowed. "Let's drink to freedom! to
fishing! hunting! loafing! Let's drink
to a guy who's going home!"

At least I imagine some such words,
for that is all I can do, imagine, and I
see Father's hand trembling in midair
as he thinks about the fifteen sober
years and about the doctors' warning,
and he tells himself, Goddammit, I am
a free man, and Why can't a free man
drink one beer after a lifetime of hard
work? and I see his arm reaching,
his fingers closing, the can tilting to
his lips. I even supply a label for the beer,
a swaggering brand that promises on
television to deliver the essence of
life. I watch the amber liquid pour
down his throat, the alcohol steal into
his blood, the key turn in his brain.

Soon after my parents moved back
to Father's treacherous stomping
ground, my wife and I visited them in
Mississippi with our four-year-old
daughter. Mother had been too dis-
traught to warn me about the return
of the demons. So when I climbed out
of the car that bright July morning and
saw my father napping in the hammock,
I felt uneasy, and when he lurched
right and blinked his bloodshot eyes and
greeted us in a syrupy voice, I was hurls back into
childhood.

"What's the matter with Papaw?"
our daughter asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing!"

Like a child again, I pretended not
to see him in his stupor, and behind
my phony smile I grieved. On that
visit and on the few that remained be-
fore his death, once again I found bot-
tles in the workbench, bottles in the
woods. Again his hands shook too
much for him to run a saw, to make
his precious miniature furniture, to
drive straight down back roads. Again
he would go in the ditch, in the
hospital, in jail, in the treatment center.
Again he shouted and wept. Again he
lied. "I never touched a drop," he
swore. "Your mother's making it up.

I no longer fancied I could reason
with the men whose names I found on
the bottles—Jim Beam, Jack Dan-
nel's—but I was able now to recall
the cold statistics about alcoholism: ten
million victims, fifteen million, twenty.
And yet, in spite of my age, I
reacted in the same blind way as I had in
childhood, by vainly seeking to
erase through my efforts whatever
drove him to drink. I worked on their
place twelve and sixteen hours a day, in
the swelter of Mississippi summers,
digging ditches, running electrical wires, planting trees, mowing grass, building sheds, as though what nagged at him was some list of chores, as though by taking his worries upon my shoulders I could redeem him. I was flung back into boyhood, acting as though my father would not drink himself to death if only I were perfect.

I failed of perfection; he succeeded in dying. To the end, he considered himself not sick but sinful. “Do you want to kill yourself?” I asked him. “Why not?” he answered. “Why the hell not? What's there to save?” To the end, he would not speak about his feelings, would not or could not give a name to the beast that was devouring him.

In silence, he went rushing off the cliff. Unlike the biblical swine, however, he left behind a few of the demons to haunt his children. Life with him and the loss of him twisted us into shapes that will be familiar to other sons and daughters of alcoholics. My brother became a rebel, my sister retreated into shyness, I played the stalwart and dutiful son who would hold the family together. If my father was unstable, I would be a rock. If he squandered money on drink, I would pinch every penny. If he wept when drunk—and only when drunk—I would not let myself weep at all. If he roared at the Little League umpire for calling my pitches balls, I would throw nothing but strikes. Watching him flounder and rage, I came to dread the loss of control. I would go through life without making anyone mad. I vowed never to put in my mouth or veins any chemical that would banish my everyday self. I would never make a scene, never lash out at the ones I loved, never hurt a soul. Through hard work, relentless work, I would achieve something dazzling—in the classroom, on the basketball court, in the science lab, in the pages of books—and my achievement would distract the world’s eyes from his humiliation. I would become a worthy sacrifice, and the smoke of my burning would please God.

It is far easier to recognize these twists in my character than to undo them. Work has become an addiction for me, as drink was an addiction for my father. Knowing this, my daughter gave me a placard for the wall: WORKAHOLIC. The labor is endless and futile, for I can no more redeem myself through work than I could redeem my father. I still panic in the face of other people’s anger, because his drunken temper was so terrible. I shrink from causing sadness or disappointment even to strangers, as though I were still concealing the family shame. I still notice every twitch of emotion in those faces around me, having learned as a child to read the weather in faces, and I blame myself for their least pang of unhappiness or anger. In certain moods I blame myself for everything. Guilt burns like acid in my veins.

I am moved to write these pages now because my own son, at the age of ten, is taking on himself the griefs of the world, and in particular the griefs of his father. He tells me that when I am gripped by sadness, he feels responsible; he feels there must be something he can do to spring me from depression, to fix my life. And that crushing sense of responsibility is exactly what I felt at the age of ten in the face of my father’s drinking. My son wonders if I, too, am possessed. I write, therefore, to drag into the light what eats at me—the fear, the guilt, the shame—that my own children may be spared.

I still shy away from nightclubs, from bars, from parties where the solvent is alcohol. My friends puzzle over this, but it is no more peculiar than for a man to shy away from the lions’ den after seeing his father torn apart. I took my own first drink at the age of twenty-one, half a glass of burgundy. I knew the odds of my becoming an alcoholic were four times higher than for the children of nonalcoholic fathers. So I sipped warily.

I still do—once a week, perhaps, a glass of wine, a can of beer, nothing stronger, nothing more. I listen for the turning of a key in my brain.