

ECHO SPRING

HERE'S A THING. IOWA CITY, 1973. Two men in a car, a Ford Falcon convertible that's seen better days. It's winter, the kind of cold that hurts bones and lungs, that reddens knuckles, makes noses run. If you could, by some devoted act of seeing, crane in through the window as they rattle by, you'd see the older man, the one in the passenger seat, has forgotten to put on his socks. He's wearing penny loafers on bare feet, oblivious to the cold, like a prep school boy on a summer jaunt. In fact you could mistake him for a boy: slight, in Brooks Brothers tweeds and flannel trousers, his hair immaculately combed. Only his face betrays him, collapsed into hangdog folds.

The other man is bigger, burlier, thirty-five. Sideburns, bad teeth, a ragged sweater open at the elbow. It's not quite nine a.m. They turn off the highway and pull into the parking lot of the state liquor store. The clerk's out front, keys glinting in his hand. Seeing him, the man in the passenger seat yanks the door and lurches out, never mind the car's still moving. 'By the time I got inside the store,' the other man will write, a long time later, 'he was already at the checkout stand with half a gallon of Scotch.'

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They drive away, passing the bottle back and forth. Within a few hours they'll be back at the University of Iowa, swaying eloquently in front of their respective classes. Both are, as if it isn't obvious, in deep trouble with alcohol. Both are also writers, one very well known, the other just cresting into success.

John Cheever, the older man, is the author of three novels, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, *The Wapshot Scandal* and *Bullet Park*, as well as some of the most miraculous and distinctive stories ever written. He's sixty-one. Back in May, he was rushed to hospital with dilated cardiomyopathy, testament to the almighty havoc alcohol wreaks upon the heart. After three days in the Intensive Care Unit he developed delirium tremens, becoming so violently disturbed he had to be secured with a leather straitjacket. The job at Iowa – a semester teaching at the famous Writers' Workshop – must have seemed like a passport to a better life, though it isn't quite panning out that way. For various reasons he's left his family behind, living like a bachelor in a single room at the Iowa House Hotel.

Raymond Carver, the younger man, has also just joined the faculty. His room is identical to Cheever's, and immediately beneath it. The same painting hangs on both their walls. He's come alone too, leaving his wife and teenaged children in California. All his life he's wanted to be a writer, and all his life he's felt circumstance set hard against him. The drinking's been going on for a long while, but despite its deprivations he's managed to produce two volumes of poetry and to build up quite a clutch of stories, many of them published in little magazines.

At first glance, the two men seem polar opposites. Cheever looks and sounds every inch the moneyed Wasp, though closer acquaintance reveals this to be a complex kind of subterfuge. Carver, on the other

hand, is a millworker's son from Clatskanie, Oregon, who spent years supporting his writing with menial jobs as a janitor, a stockboy and a cleaner.

They met on the evening of 30 August 1973. Cheever knocked on the door of room 240, holding out a glass and announcing, according to Jon Jackson, a student who was present at the time: 'Pardon me. I'm John Cheever. Could I borrow some Scotch?' Carver, elated to meet one of his heroes, stutteringly held out a vast bottle of Smirnoff. Cheever accepted a slug, though he turned his nose up at the embellishments of ice or juice.

Sensing a dual intersection of interests, the two men immediately bonded. They spent much of their time together in the Mill bar, which only served beer, talking about literature and women. Twice a week they drove out in Carver's Falcon to the liquor store for Scotch, which they drank in Cheever's room. 'He and I did nothing *but* drink,' Carver reported later, in the *Paris Review*. 'I mean, we met our classes in a manner of speaking, but the entire time we were there . . . I don't think either of us ever took the covers off our typewriters.'

What's odd about this wasteful year, not to mention all the disasters that followed on its heels, is that Cheever predicted it, in a manner of speaking. A decade earlier, he wrote a short story published in the *New Yorker* on 18 July 1964. 'The Swimmer' is about alcohol and what it can do to a man; how conclusively it can wipe out a life. It begins with a characteristically Cheeverish line: 'It was one of those mid-summer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, "I drank too much last night."'

One of those people is Neddy Merrill, a slender, boyish man with an attractive air of vitality about him. Trotting out into the sunshine

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for a morning dip in his host's pool, he's struck by a delightful idea: that he will make his way home by way of a 'string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county'. He names this secret road of mixed waters *Lucinda*, in honour of his wife. But there's another liquid path he also follows: a chain of drinks taken on neighbours' terraces and yards, and it's this more perilous route that leads him downwards by degrees to the story's uncanny and tragic end.

High on his marvellous plan, Neddy swims through the gardens of the Grahams and the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, the Crosscups and the Bunkers. As he passes on his self-appointed way he's plied with gin by 'natives' – whose customs, he thinks to himself disingenuously, 'would have to be handled with diplomacy if he was ever going to reach his destination'. The next house he reaches is deserted, and after he's crossed the pool he slips into the gazebo and pours himself a drink: his fourth, he calculates vaguely, or perhaps his fifth. A great citadel of cumulus has been building all day, and now the storm breaks, a quick paradiddle of rain in the oaks followed by the pleasurable smell of cordite.

Neddy likes storms, but something about this downpour changes the tenor of his day. Sheltering in the gazebo, he notices a Japanese lantern that Mrs. Levy bought in Kyoto 'the year before last, or was it the year before that?' Anyone can lose their footing in time, can misstep a beat or two of chronology. But then there's another queer flicker in temporality. The rain has stripped the maple, and the red and yellow leaves lie scattered on the grass. It's midsummer, Neddy thinks robustly, and so the tree must simply be blighted, but this sign of autumn gives him an unpleasant shot of melancholy.

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The sense of foreclosure deepens. At the Lindleys, the jumping ring is overgrown and the horses seem to have been sold. Worse, the Welchers' pool has been drained. The Lucinda, that magical, abundant river, has run dry. Neddy is staggered, and begins seriously to doubt his command of time. 'Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?' He pulls himself together though, rallying enough to cross Route 424, a portage more effortful and exposing than he'd expected.

Next he braves the public baths, with their whistles and murky water. No pleasure there, but he's soon up and out, clambering through the woods of the Halloran estate towards the dark, dazzled gold of their springfed pool. But here comes another offbeat, a sense that the world Neddy is travelling through is somehow strange to him, or he to it. Mrs. Halloran asks solicitously about his poor children, muttering something too about the loss of his house. Then, as he walks away, Neddy notices his shorts are hanging around his waist. Is it possible, he wonders, that he's lost weight over the course of a single afternoon? Time is slopping around like gin in a glass. It's still emphatically the same day, but now the warmth of midsummer has dissipated and the smell of wood smoke is articulate in the air.

From the Hallorans Neddy travels to their daughter's house, hoping to beg a glass of whiskey. Helen greets him warmly enough, but her house is dry and has been for three years. Bewildered, chilled to the bone, he heaves his way across the pool and cuts through the fields to the Biswangers. From the roar of voices it's evident a party is in full swing. He wanders in, still almost naked. But now, mysteriously, it's twilight, and the water on the pool has 'a wintry gleam'. Mrs.

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Biswanger, who has angled for Neddy as a guest for years, has apparently suffered some change of heart. She greets him rudely, and when his back is turned can be heard saying: 'They went for broke overnight – nothing but income – and he showed up drunk one Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars.' Then the bartender rebuffs him, confirming his sneaking sense that some social loss of grace has occurred, and been remembered and recorded.

Struggling on, he passes next through the garden of a former mistress, though he can't remember precisely when or in what mood he broke it off. She isn't wholly pleased to see him either, and is likewise fretful about the possibility that he wants money. Leaving, he catches on the cooling air an autumnal smell, not quite placeable but 'strong as gas'. Marigolds? Chrysanthemums? Looking up, he sees the winter constellations have taken up their stations in the night sky. Flooded with uncertainty, he begins, for the first time in his life, to cry.

There are only two more pools to go. He flails and gasps through the final laps before walking in damp trunks up the drive to his own house. But now the hints about a downturn in his fortunes begin to clarify, for the lights are out, the doors are locked, the rooms are empty and nobody, it is clear, has lived here for a long while.

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'The Swimmer' had come into my mind because I was plummeting through the sky above New York, where the land breaks apart in a clutter of islands and marshes. There are some subjects one can't address at home, and so at the beginning of the year I'd left England for America, a country almost entirely unknown to me. I wanted time to

think, and what I wanted to think about was alcohol. I'd spent the winter upcountry, in a cottage in New Hampshire, and now it was spring and I was moving south.

Last time I'd passed over here the earth was white all the way up to the Arctic, and the Connecticut River turned through dark bars of forest frozen the metallic blue-grey of the barrel of a gun. Now the ice had melted, and the whole landscape was ablaze. It reminded me of Cheever's line – that to live 'in a world so generously supplied with water seemed like a clemency, a beneficence'.

'The Swimmer', which I would judge among the finest stories ever written, catches in its strange compressions the full arc of an alcoholic's life and it was that same dark trajectory I wanted to pursue. I wanted to know what made a person drink and what it did to them. More specifically I wanted to know why writers drink, and what effect this stew of spirits has had upon the body of literature itself.

John Cheever and Raymond Carver are hardly the only writers whose lives were made desolate by alcohol. Alongside them come Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Jean Rhys, Patricia Highsmith, Truman Capote, Dylan Thomas, Marguerite Duras, Hart Crane, John Berryman, Jack London, Elizabeth Bishop, Raymond Chandler – the list staggers on. As Lewis Hyde observes in his essay 'Alcohol and Poetry', 'four of the six Americans who have won the Nobel Prize for literature were alcoholic. About half of our alcoholic writers eventually killed themselves.'

Alcoholism is not a simple condition to define. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, its essential features are 'impaired control over drinking, preoccupation with the drug alcohol, use of alcohol despite adverse consequences, and distortions in thinking,

most notably denial'. In 1980, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* dropped the term 'alcoholism' entirely, replacing it with two interrelated disorders: alcohol abuse (defined as 'repeated use despite recurrent adverse consequences') and alcohol dependence (defined as '*alcohol abuse* combined with tolerance, withdrawal and an uncontrollable drive to drink').

As to what causes it, the jury remains out. In fact, under the heading 'Etiology', my old 1992 *Merck Manual* announces baldly: 'The cause of alcoholism is unknown.' In the intervening years there have been thousands of research programmes and academic studies, and yet the consensus remains that alcoholism is caused by some mysterious constellation of factors, among them personality traits, early life experiences, societal influences, genetic predisposition and abnormal chemistry of the brain. Listing these possible causes, the current edition of the *Merck Manual* concludes, a little dispiritedly: 'However, such generalizations should not obscure the fact that alcohol use disorders can occur in anyone, regardless of their age, sex, background, ethnicity, or social situation.'

Unsurprisingly, the theories writers tend to offer lean more towards the symbolic than the sociological or scientific. Discussing Poe, Baudelaire once commented that alcohol had become a weapon 'to kill something inside himself, a worm that would not die'. In his introduction to *Recovery*, the posthumously published novel of the poet John Berryman, Saul Bellow observed: 'Inspiration contained a death threat. He would, as he wrote the things he had waited and prayed for, fall apart. Drink was a stabiliser. It somewhat reduced the fatal intensity.'

There's something about these answers and the mixed motives they

reveal that seems to catch at a deeper and more resonant aspect of alcohol addiction than the socio-genetic explanations that are in currency today. It was for this reason that I wanted to look at *writers* who drank, though God knows there's barely a section of our society that's immune to alcohol's lures. After all, it's they who, by their very nature, describe the affliction best. Often they've written about their experiences or those of their contemporaries, either transposed into fiction, or in the letters, memoirs and diaries they've used to mythologise or interrogate their lives.

As I began to read through these rafts of papers, I realised something else. These men and women were connected, both physically and by a series of repeating patterns. They were each other's friends and allies, each other's mentors, students and inspirations. In addition to Raymond Carver and John Cheever in Iowa, there were other drinking partnerships, other vexed allegiances. Hemingway and Fitzgerald tumbled together in the cafés of 1920s Paris, while the poet John Berryman was the first person at Dylan Thomas's bedside when he died.

Then there were the echoes. I'd grown most interested in six male writers, whose experiences seemed to dovetail and mirror each other. (There were many women writers I could have chosen too, but for reasons that will become apparent their stories came too close to home.) Most of this six had – or saw themselves as having – that most Freudian of pairings, an overbearing mother and a weak father. All were tormented by self-hatred and a sense of inadequacy. Three were profoundly promiscuous, and almost all experienced conflict and dissatisfaction with regard to their sexuality. Most died in middle age, and the deaths that weren't suicides tended to be directly related to the years of hard and hectic living. At times, all tried in varying degrees

to give up alcohol, but only two succeeded, late in life, in becoming permanently dry.

These sound like tragic lives, the lives of wastrels or dissolutes, and yet these six men – F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, John Cheever, John Berryman and Raymond Carver – produced between them some of the most beautiful writing this world has ever seen. As Jay McInerney once commented of Cheever: ‘There have been thousands of sexually conflicted alcoholics, but only one of them wrote “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” and “The Sorrows of Gin”.’

If I stopped a minute, I could picture each of them in turn. I saw Fitzgerald in a Guards tie, his blond hair slicked back, quietly certain about the merits of *The Great Gatsby*: a kind man, when he wasn’t whisking you into a waltz or boiling your watch up in a pot of soup. Ernest Hemingway I always pictured at the helm of a boat, or out hunting in the clean upland air, entirely focused on the task at hand. And then later, at his desk in glasses, making up the Michigan of the Nick Adams stories, making up corridas and cities, trout streams and battlefields, a world you can almost smell.

Tennessee Williams I saw in Ray-Bans and safari shorts, sitting unobtrusively at the rehearsal of one of his own plays: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, say, or *Suddenly Last Summer*. It’s not locked yet, and so he fixes sections on demand, braying his donkey’s laugh at all the saddest lines. Cheever I liked to think of riding a bicycle, a habit he took up late in life, and Carver I always imagined with a cigarette, big-shouldered but walking softly. And then there was John Berryman, the donnish poet and professor, light gleaming on his glasses, his beard enormous, standing in front of a class at Princeton or the University of Minnesota, reading *Lycidas* and making the whole room see how *marvellous* it was.

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There have been many books and articles that revel in describing exactly how grotesque and shameful the behaviour of alcoholic writers can be. That wasn't my intention. What I wanted was to discover how each of these men – and, along the way, some of the many others who'd suffered from the disease – experienced and thought about their addiction. If anything, it was an expression of my faith in literature, and its power to map the more difficult regions of human experience and knowledge.

As to the origins of my interest, I might as well admit I grew up in an alcoholic family myself. Between the ages of eight and eleven I lived in a house under the rule of alcohol, and the effects of that period have stayed with me ever since. Reading Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at seventeen was the first time I found the behaviour I'd grown up amid not only named and delineated but actively confronted. From that moment on I was preoccupied by what writers had to say about alcohol and its effects. If I had any hope of making sense of alcoholics – and my life as an adult seemed just as full of them – it would be by investigating the residue they'd left behind in books.

There was a line from *Cat* in particular that had stayed with me for years. Brick, the drunkard, has been summoned by his father. Big Daddy is on a talking jag and after a while Brick asks for his crutch. 'Where you goin'?' Big Daddy asks, and Brick replies: 'I'm takin' a little short trip to Echo Spring.' Physically, Echo Spring is nothing more than a nickname for a liquor cabinet, drawn from the brand of bourbon it contains. Symbolically, though, it refers to something quite different: perhaps to the attainment of silence, or to the obliteration of troubled thoughts that comes, temporarily at least, with a sufficiency of booze.

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Echo Spring. What a lovely, consoling place it sounds. It set off another echo, too. By coincidence or otherwise most of these men shared a deep, enriching love for water. John Cheever and Tennessee Williams were passionate, even fanatical swimmers, while Hemingway and Fitzgerald shared an abiding fondness for the sea. In Raymond Carver's case, his relationship with water – particularly those freezing bottle-green trout streams that tumble out of the mountains above Port Angeles – would eventually come in some deep way to replace his toxic need for alcohol. In one of his late, wide-open poems, he wrote:

I love them the way some men love horses
or glamorous women. I have a thing
for this cold swift water.
Just looking at it makes my blood run
and my skin tingle.

The word *trip* also seemed important. Many alcoholics, including the writers I was interested in, have been relentless travellers, driven like uneasy spirits across their own nations and into the other countries of this world. Like Cheever, I had a notion that it might be possible to plot the course of some of these restless lives by way of a physical journey across America. Over the next few weeks, I planned to take what is known in AA circles as a *geographical*, a footloose journey across the country, first south, through New York, New Orleans and Key West, and then north-west, via St. Paul, the site of John Berryman's ill-fated recovery, and on to the rivers and creeks of Port Angeles, where Raymond Carver spent his last, exultant years.

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Looked at on a map, this itinerary seems haphazard, even a little masochistic, particularly since I'd resolved to travel largely by train. Like many things to do with the subject, though, its real meaning was encoded. Each of these locations had served as a way station or staging post in which the successive phases of alcohol addiction had been acted out. By travelling through them in sequence, I thought it might be possible to build a kind of topographical map of alcoholism, tracing its developing contours from the pleasures of intoxication through to the gruelling realities of the drying-out process. And as I worked across the country, passing back and forth between books and lives, I hoped I might come closer to understanding what alcohol addiction means, or at least to finding out what those who struggled with and were sometimes destroyed by it thought alcohol had meant for them.

The first of the cities was fast approaching. While I'd been gazing out of the window, the seatbelt sign had switched to green. I fumbled for the pin and turned again to the glass. Outside, the ground was rising swiftly through the colourless miles of air. Now I could see Long Island, and beyond the ruffled waters the runways of JFK. Silhouetted behind it were the skyscrapers of Manhattan, rising like iron filings into the pale sky. 'These stories seem at times to be stories of a long-lost world when the city of New York was still filled with a river light,' John Cheever once wrote wistfully about the city he most loved. It did indeed seem to shine, an island citadel bounded by water, the Atlantic flashing pewter as we hedged in above the waves.

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MONTHS AGO, BACK IN ENGLAND, when I was just beginning to think down into the subject of alcohol, I became certain that whatever journey I was making would begin in a hotel room on East 54th Street, ten minutes' walk from Broadway. I don't know why this, of all possible locations, seemed the necessary place to start, but the story of what had happened there worked its way inside me, as certain stories will.

In the small hours of 25 February 1983, Tennessee Williams died in his suite at the Elysée, a small, pleasant hotel on the outskirts of the Theater District. He was seventy-one, unhappy, a little underweight, addicted to drugs and alcohol and paranoid sometimes to the point of delirium. According to the coroner's report, he'd choked on the bell-shaped plastic cap of a bottle of eyedrops, which he was in the habit of placing on or under his tongue while he administered to his vision. As a child he'd been poked in the eye with a stick, and in his twenties this damage manifested itself as a greyish cataract that covered his left pupil. Eventually it was cut away, but the sight in that eye was never good and eyedrops were among the extensive medical paraphernalia he took on all his travels.

The next day, the *New York Times* ran an obituary claiming him as ‘the most important American playwright after Eugene O’Neill’. It listed his three Pulitzer Prizes, for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Night of the Iguana*, adding: ‘He wrote with deep sympathy and expansive humor about outcasts in our society. Though his images were often violent, he was a poet of the human heart.’

Later, after carrying out chemical tests, the city’s chief medical officer, Dr. Eliot M. Grosse, amended the autopsy report to add that the barbiturate secobarbital was in Williams’s system when he died. Much later, various friends and acquaintances claimed the choking story was a cover-up to stop the press from delving into Tennessee’s numerous addictions, though the official cause of death remains asphyxia.

It wasn’t the death he’d hoped for, either way. In his memoir, his wandering, anti-lucid memoir, he wrote that he wanted to die on a *letto matrimoniale*, a wedding bed, surrounded by *contadini*, farmers, their faces puzzled and full of sweetness, holding out in their shaking hands little glasses of *vino* or *liquore*. He wanted it to happen in Sicily, where he’d been happiest, but if that wasn’t possible he was willing to settle for the big brass bed at Dumaine Street, his house in New Orleans, where the clouds always seemed just overhead.

There should be nothing more arbitrary than the place where someone dies, on their way from one thing to the next, and yet it’s telling, too, that a man who was forever on the move should finish up in a hotel room, surrounded by pills and paper, two bottles of wine open on his nightstand. We die as we live, disordered, and while the manner of his death was accidental to the point of grotesqueness, its location exposes that cast of vagrancy that was, though it sounds a funny thing to say, one of the most certain things about him.

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He kept all sorts of roosts in New York, though he never stayed in them for long. For years he had an apartment around the corner on East 58th Street that he shared with his partner, Frank Merlo: Frank with his sad horse face and ready charm, Frank the protector, the aide-de-camp, who died of lung cancer in 1963, inaugurating the very worst period of Williams's Stoned Age. Later, he took an apartment in the Manhattan Plaza, the residential complex designed for performing artists. He'd been lured there by the promise of a swimming pool, but the partyish atmosphere didn't suit him and even before he'd given up the lease he generally stayed in a suite at the Elysée.

The hotel was useful because of its proximity to the theatres, but by the time he died it had been three years since he'd had a play on the Great White Way. The last was *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, an addled rehash of the difficult marriage between Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald. 'No growth, no change, no flow of life anywhere for us to piece together,' Walter Kerr wrote in the *New York Times*, adding crossly, as if the failure were wilful: '*Clothes for a Summer Hotel* is Tennessee Williams holding his tongue.'

It was hardly the worst thing he'd heard from a critic. Back in 1969 *Life* magazine had called him a White Dwarf, continuing: 'We are still receiving his messages, but it is now obvious that they come from a cinder.' Imagine writing a play after that, let alone going on for another fourteen years, sitting down at your typewriter every morning, despite the depredations of drugs and alcohol, of loneliness and growing ill health. 'Gallant,' wrote Elia Kazan, the director who knew him as well as anyone, 'is the word to describe Tennessee at the end.'

You get a sense of that courage, that indefatigable work ethic, in a 1981 interview with the *Paris Review*, the latter half of which was

conducted in his rooms at the Elysée. He talks about his plays and the people he's known, and he touches too, a little disingenuously, on the role of alcohol in his life, saying:

O'Neill had a terrible problem with alcohol. Most writers do. American writers nearly all have problems with alcohol because there's a great deal of tension involved in writing, you know that. And it's all right up to a certain age, and then you begin to need a little nervous support that you get from drinking. Now my drinking has to be moderate. Just look at the liver spots I've got on me!

You know that. A little nervous support. My drinking has to be moderate. He was 'tired', the interviewer observes carefully, because they'd spent the preceding night in a bar called Rounds, which 'boasts a somewhat piss-elegant decor and a clientele consisting largely of male hustlers and those who employ them'. Gallant, yes: but also not an entirely reliable witness to the traffic of his own life.

The Elysée was not the kind of place I could afford but a friend at Condé Nast had wangled me a room. There was a chandelier in the lobby and someone had painted a trompe l'oeil garden on the far wall. It looked vaguely Italian: lemon trees, black and white tiles and a box-lined path that narrowed bluely towards some wooded hills. As I checked in I asked which floor Tennessee's old suite was on. I'd planned to pop up in the morning and see if a chambermaid would let me peek inside. But the Sunset Suite no longer existed. The boy at the front desk, who looked like he might play field hockey, added surprisingly: 'We divided it up to get rid of bad spirits.'

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People believe strange things. Rose Williams, Tennessee's adored sister, who had a pre-frontal lobotomy at the age of twenty-eight and still outlived all her immediate family, refused to acknowledge death when it occurred. But once, or so her brother recorded in *Memoirs*, she said: 'It rained last night. The dead came down with the rain.' He asked, in the gentle tone he almost always used with her, if she meant their voices and she replied, 'Yes, of course, their voices.'

I don't believe in ghosts, but I am interested in absences, and the fact that the room had ceased to exist pleased me. I was beginning to think that drinking might be a way of disappearing from the world, or at least of slipping one's appointed place within it, though if you'd seen Tennessee blundering through the hallway, pie-eyed and legless, you might think conversely it made one all too painfully impossible to miss. It seemed appropriate, anyhow, that this place where I thought I'd start my journey should turn out to be a non-place, a gap in the map. I looked at the trompe l'oeil garden again. That was the path to follow, into the vanishing point, past the wavering blue brushstrokes with which the artist had indicated the threshold of his knowledge.



Time, Tennessee Williams wrote in *The Glass Menagerie*, is the longest distance between two places. I'd been trying to work out when he first came to New York. I figured from his letters that it must have been in the summer of 1928, when he was a shy, sheltered boy of seventeen – the same trip, as it happens, in which he tried alcohol for the first time. Back then he was still called Tom; still lived with his family in hateful St. Louis.

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He'd been invited by his beloved grandfather, the Reverend Walter Dakin, to join a touring party made up of various adventuresome parishioners. The group would travel by way of a White Star liner from New York to Southampton, and then go on to France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy: a democratic, twentieth-century version of the aristocratic Grand Tour.

The trip began with a four-day blowout at the Biltmore, the hotel by Grand Central Terminal where Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald had spent their honeymoon eight years before. 'We have just concluded dinner with a multi-millionaire . . . in his seven room suite at the end of the hall,' the would-be sophisticate wrote home in ecstasy. 'I was sitting at the same table, in his private suite, where the Prince of Wales had sat during his stay at the Biltmore in 1921! Did that kill me!!'

Life aboard ship was even more riotous. They set sail at midnight on the ss *Homeric*, in what he recalled much later as a gala departure, with brass bands and a great deal of coloured paper ribbons tossed back and forth between the vessel and the well-wishers on Pier 54. The next day he drank his first alcoholic beverage, a green crème-de-menthe, and afterwards was violently seasick.

Not wholly convinced by this newly adult pleasure, he reported to his mother: 'Grandfather . . . keeps his tongue pretty slick with Manhattin Coctails and Rye-Ginger Ales. I have tried them all but prefer none to plain ginger-ale and Coca Cola. So I'm afraid I'm not getting all the kick out of this boat that the others are getting.' Six days on, in the Hotel Rochambeau, he changed his tune, opening a letter home with the exultant declaration:

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I have just imbibed a whole glass of french champagne and am feeling consequently very elated. It is our last evening in Paris which excuses the unusual indulgence. French champagne is the only drink I like here. But it is really delicious.

He didn't add what he would later dwell on in his memoir, that in the boulevards of Paris he began abruptly to feel afraid of what he called the process of thought, and that over the weeks of travel this phobia grew so intense he came within 'a hairsbreadth of going quite mad'. Later, he described this experience as 'the most dreadful, the most nearly psychotic, crisis that occurred in my early life'.

It wasn't the first time Tom had suffered from anxiety, though it was the most serious attack he'd had so far. He'd always been an acutely sensitive boy, a condition not helped by the disruptions of his household. His parents had met in 1906 and married the next year. Edwina Williams was a pretty, popular, talkative girl who had in her youth nurtured a fantasy of going on the stage. Her husband, Cornelius Coffin Williams, was a travelling salesman who sold men's clothes and later shoes. In addition he played poker, drank heavily and generally conveyed in all his habits his congenital unsuitability to domestic life.

After their marriage the couple lived together, but when she fell pregnant with her first child in 1909 Edwina returned to her parents, moving with them through a succession of rectories in Mississippi and Tennessee. Tom came along two years later, on Palm Sunday, 26 March 1911: a concentrated, watchful baby. The south suited him. He had his sister Rose for company, and would remember this period much later as 'joyfully innocent', though his father was rarely present. As a very little boy he was active and robust, but in first grade he caught

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diphtheria, and was taken out of school. He spent most of the next year on his own in bed, acting out invented scenes with a pack of cards for players. By the time he returned to his classmates, he'd changed dramatically, becoming delicate and frail.

In 1918, the southern idyll came abruptly to an end. Cornelius had been promoted to a management position at the International Shoe Company and wanted to set up home in St. Louis. Living with his children for the first time, he regarded the older two with contempt, though he liked Dakin, the son born a few months after their arrival in the city. The pattern of geographic instability established in the south didn't stop once the Williamses were reunited, either. By the time Tom was fifteen, he'd lived in sixteen different houses, though it wasn't until the family's arrival in St. Louis that he realised how poor they were. The apartments they rented were tiny; the colour, he recalled later, of mustard and dried blood. In these nasty confined spaces, his parents' incompatibility was ruthlessly exposed, while Rose began her precipitous descent towards a mental breakdown.

'Life at home was terrible, just terrible,' Dakin wrote decades later in a letter to Williams's biographer Donald Spoto. 'By the late 1920s, mother and father were in open warfare, and both were good combatants. He came home drunk . . . and he'd fly into a rage . . . there'd be a vicious row and finally mother would do her famous fainting act.' The dainty, troubled Rose found these fights increasingly petrifying, while Tom harboured bitter memories of being called *Miss Nancy* for his cissyish interest in books and movies, recording as an adult that his father 'was a terrifying man'.

In his teens Williams was pathologically shy, blushing whenever another pair of eyes met his. Not surprising then that on his first trip

abroad he might experience an attack of paralysing anxiety. But something else had happened on the ss *Homeric* itself, a disturbing encounter that may also have played a role. Tom spent a good deal of his time aboard ship waltzing with a dance instructor, a young woman of twenty-seven. 'I was in those days an excellent dancer and we "just swept around the floor: and swept and swept" as Zelda would put it.' Later, he overheard her friend, a man with the baroque name of Captain de Voe, making a crack about his sexuality, an incident he found singularly disturbing, though it was a good while before he figured out its meaning. What the man had said was: 'You know his future, don't you?' to which the teacher replied: 'I don't think you can be sure about that at the age of seventeen.'

As the party travelled from Paris to Venice, Milan and Montreux, Tom kept up his cheerful letters home, describing mountains, castles and the places where he swam. He never mentioned his fears, though by the time the tour reached the Rhine he was certain he was going crazy. The phobia, as he explained it later, involved the sense that 'the process of thought was a terrifyingly complex mystery of human life'. Things came to a head in a cathedral in Cologne. He knelt down and began to pray. The rest of the party left. Light was flooding in through the stained glass windows in coloured shafts. Then something miraculous occurred. He had the uncanny sense of being touched by a hand: 'and at the instant of that touch the phobia was lifted away as lightly as a snowflake though it had weighed on my head like a skull-breaking block of iron'. A religious boy, he was certain he'd experienced the hand of Christ.

For a week he was very happy, and then in Amsterdam the phobia returned. This time, he chased it away almost immediately by composing

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a poem on the comforts of remembering one is only an individual in a crowd of equally complex beings. The poem itself is barely more than doggerel ('I hear their laughter and their sighs, / I look into their myriad eyes'), but the experience was pivotal. In *Memoirs*, he reflected on how important this recognition of being part of a collective was, not just for his own but for any attempt to achieve balance of mind: 'that recognition of being a member of multiple humanity with its multiple needs, problems and emotions, not a unique creature but one, only one among the multitude of its fellows'.

It was a useful insight. Tom Williams, soon to become Tennessee, would suffer lifelong from moods of terror. Many of the ways he found of medicating and soothing himself were toxic, among them his relationship with alcohol. But discovering that he could dissolve anxiety by looking outward didn't just save his sanity. It also alerted him to the importance of empathy, that cardinal virtue of the playwright.



I lay awake most of that first night at the Elysée, dreaming in a small window of sleep of a cat with raspberries tangled in its fur. The next morning I had two unprecedented appointments. The first was to visit a psychiatrist and the second was to attend an AA meeting. My cab driver had only just arrived in the city too, and together we muddled out a route to St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital on 10th Avenue and 58th Street. The Addiction Institute was on the ninth floor, down a run of corridors that seemed to spiral inward like a snail's shell. By the time I was ushered into the director's office I was thoroughly disorientated.

I thought I was deep inside the building and the presence of a window startled me. The books were arranged according to colour, lavender to violet, turquoise to green; a buttress assembled in praise of order.

Back in the day, the Addiction Institute was called the Smithers Alcohol Treatment and Training Center. It's where John Cheever and Truman Capote went to dry out, though only the former was successful in his labours. At that point, in the spring of 1975, it was located in a brownstone at 56 East 93rd Street. 'The house is palatial and not at all shabby,' Cheever wrote in a letter during his voluntary incarceration. 'The tenants are forty-two drug addicts and clinical alcoholics.' He shared his room with a con man, a ballet dancer, a sailor and the owner of an unsuccessful German deli, who talked in his sleep, asking all night long: 'Haff you been taken care of? Haff you been waited on?' He was intensely miserable (hardly the place for such a distinguished Yankee as a *Cheevah*) and complained vociferously throughout his twenty-eight-day internment, but it got him sober and in all probability also saved his life.

In order to understand how an intelligent man could end up in such a place, it's necessary first to know what a shot of Smirnoff or Scotch does to the human body. Alcohol, also known as ethanol, is both an intoxicant and a central nervous depressant, with an immensely complex effect upon the brain. In simple terms, it works by interfering with the activity of neurotransmitters, the chemicals by which the nervous system relays information around the body. Its effects can be divided into two categories. Alcohol activates the pleasure-reward pathways by way of dopamine and serotonin. In psychological terms this effect is known as *positive reinforcement*, since continuing to ingest the substance leads to pleasure.

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But alcohol also works by way of *negative reinforcement*. In the brain, there are two types of neurotransmitters: inhibitory and excitatory. Inhibitory neurotransmitters depress activity in the central nervous system, while excitatory neurotransmitters stimulate it. When alcohol is ingested, it interacts with the receptor sites of an inhibitory neurotransmitter called gamma-aminobutyric acid or GABA, mimicking its effects. The result is sedative, reducing activity in the brain. In addition, alcohol blocks the receptor sites of an excitatory neurotransmitter: N-methyl-D-aspartate or NMDA (a subset of glutamate, the major excitatory neurotransmitter), preventing its activity. This also causes a reduction in excitation, albeit by a different route.

These sedative effects are what makes alcohol so adept at reducing tension and anxiety. Both positive and negative reinforcement drive alcoholism, but as the addiction progresses it is negative reinforcement that tends to take the larger role. ‘The click’, Brick calls it in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. ‘This click that I get in my head that makes me peaceful. I got to drink till I get it. It’s just a mechanical thing . . . I just haven’t got the right level of alcohol in my bloodstream yet.’

The realisation that alcohol is capable of alleviating anxiety means that for susceptible individuals it can quickly become the preferred method of managing stress. There’s more than a hint of this in a letter John Cheever wrote about an early experiment with drinking. Intimidated by a social gathering, he discovered alcohol’s powerful knack for obliterating nerves. ‘The next engagement that threatened to arouse my shyness,’ he wrote, ‘I bought a bottle of gin and drank four fingers neat. The company was brilliant, chatty and urbane and so was I.’ In *Memoirs*, Tennessee Williams takes up the same refrain, noting that after a *mezzo-litro* of Frascati, ‘you felt as if a new kind of

blood had been transfused into your arteries, a blood that swept away all anxiety and all tension for a while, and for a while is the stuff that dreams are made of’.

For a while. The problem is that over time the brain begins to adjust to the presence of alcohol, compensating for its effects on the central nervous system. In particular, it increases the production of excitatory neurotransmitters, so that normal activity can be maintained. This neuroadaptation is what drives addiction, eventually making the drinker require alcohol in order to function at all.

In the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (known universally as *DSM-IV-TR*), alcohol dependence is categorised as a form of substance dependence, which is defined as:

A maladaptive pattern of substance use, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by three (or more) of the following, occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:

1. Tolerance, as defined by either of the following:
 - A need for markedly increased amounts of the substance to achieve intoxication or desired effect.
 - Markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of the substance.
2. Withdrawal, as manifested by either of the following:
 - The characteristic withdrawal syndrome for the substance.
 - The same (or a closely related) substance is taken to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.

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3. The substance is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended.
4. There is a persistent desire or there are unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use.
5. A great deal of time is spent in activities necessary for obtaining the substance, using the substance or recovering from its effects.
6. Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of substance use.
7. The substance use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the substance (e.g., continued drinking despite recognition that an ulcer was made worse by alcohol consumption).

As it gathers momentum, alcohol addiction inevitably affects the drinker's physical and social selves, visibly damaging the architecture of their life. Jobs are lost. Relationships spoil. There may be accidents, arrests and injuries, or the drinker may simply become increasingly neglectful of their responsibilities and capacity to provide self-care. Conditions associated with long-term alcoholism include hepatitis, cirrhosis, fatty liver, gastritis, stomach ulcers, hypertension, heart disease, impotence, infertility, various types of cancer, increased susceptibility to infection, sleep disorders, loss of memory and personality changes caused by damage to the brain. As an early researcher into alcohol addiction wrote in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* back in 1935: 'The striking and inescapable impression one gets from a review of acute alcoholic intoxication is of the almost infinite diversity of symptoms that may ensue from the action of this single toxic agent.'

Not everyone who drinks alcohol, however, becomes an alcoholic. This disease, which exists in all quarters of the world, is caused by a multitude of factors, among them genetic predisposition, early life experience and social influences. In a 2011 paper entitled ‘The role of early life stress as a predictor for alcohol and drug dependence’, Mary-Anne Enoch, a long-term researcher in the field, wrote:

It is well established that the heritability of alcoholism is around 50% . . . Therefore, genetic and environmental influences on the development of addictive disorders are equally important, although the proportions of risk may vary according to societal groups.

Later, when I was transcribing my interview with Dr. Petros Levounis, the Addiction Institute’s director, I realised that I’d asked the question of what causes alcoholism several times over, in varying formulations, and that each time his answer was slightly different. This isn’t to say that he was imprecise. On the contrary, he was a meticulous speaker. His understanding of alcoholism involved balancing a succession of models like spinning plates. The disease was primarily genetic, but social and psychological factors were very much involved. There isn’t an alcoholic personality per se, as early theorists suggested there might be, but alcohol does bring with it a constellation of behaviours (lying, stealing, cheating; the usual car crash) that will in all probability subside or disappear entirely when sobriety is attained; although – and here he laughed a little – there are plenty of jerks who become alcoholics and continue to be jerks after they’re dry.

Near the beginning of the conversation he used a phrase that

intrigued me. He mentioned a process called the brain switch. If someone is particularly prone to alcoholism – if the genetic and social and psychological factors are all stacked against them – then they are likely to experience a change in brain function. As Dr. Levounis put it, ‘it seems that they engrave the addiction at the more primitive part of the brain, the mesolimbic system, and from that point on the addiction tends to have a life of its own, to a large extent independent of the forces that set it into motion to begin with’. He called this lively, liberated monster *the big bear*, and later *the big beast*. ‘Unfortunately,’ he added, ‘the majority of people do not really see that and have the false hope that if they go back to the root of the problem and yank out the root cause of what happened then they will be addiction-free for the rest of their lives.’

The brain switch wasn’t a concept I’d come across before. It was initially proposed about fifteen years earlier by Alan Leshner, then director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. He suggested that neurobiological changes took place around the nucleus accumbens, the part of the mesolimbic system that deals with pleasure and reward, where addiction takes hold most strongly. These neural pathways, Dr. Levounis explained, ‘don’t only signify for pleasure and pain; they also signify for salience. Essentially, they tell us what is important and what is not. So instead of having all kinds of things that are pleasurable and rewarding and salient in your life, all these things start becoming less and less important and the one that remains is primarily the drug of abuse. It’s alcohol.’

The permanence of this hijack is due primarily to the geography of the pleasure-reward pathways, their anatomical position within the nutshell of the human skull. He mapped it out for me with his hands, showing

how the mesolimbic system is sandwiched between the hippocampus, which is the memory centre of the brain, and the limbic system, which is its emotional core. It made sense to me. Memory and emotion. How else do we make decisions, except by cognition, by the pure application of reason? But that region of the brain, the frontal lobes, is far away, anatomically speaking, and imperfectly connected, especially in the young. Little wonder that alcoholism was once characterised as a failure of will. The frontal lobes weigh right and wrong, apportion risk; the limbic system is all greed and appetite and impulse, with the hippocampus adding the siren's whisper: *how sweet it was, remember?*

I shifted in my seat. I could see *The Line of Beauty* on the shelf in front of me, filed among the blue books. There were pigeons outside. The city was hammering against the window, insistent as a drill. Dr Levounis was talking now about the long-term picture: how the pleasure-reward pathways stay hijacked even in sobriety, so that although the alcoholic might stop drinking they remain vulnerable to addiction. For how long, I asked, and he replied: 'Although a lot of people manage to beat the illness, the risk of using stays with you for a long, long time, if not for the rest of your life.'

We turned then to a discussion of treatment. Dr Levounis outlined the two basic options for recovery: the abstinence-based model and the harm-reduction model. In the abstinence-based model (the version favoured by Alcoholics Anonymous), the alcoholic stops drinking entirely, concentrating on the maintenance of sobriety. In the harm-reduction model, on the other hand, the focus is on improving the conditions of one's life and not necessarily on stopping drinking. He thought, pragmatically, that both were efficacious, depending on the individual's circumstance and needs.

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There was a lot to think about in this conversation, but it was the big beast that stayed with me when I went down into the street. What would Tennessee Williams have made of it, the idea that addiction has its own momentum, its own articulated presence within the skull? I'm not sure he would have been surprised. He had a gut sense of how people are driven by irrational cravings. I thought of poor Blanche DuBois, sneaking shots of whiskey in her sister's house in New Orleans; of Brick Pollitt, hobbling back and forth to Echo Spring, saying to his dying father, 'it's hard for me to understand how anybody could care if he lived or died or was dying or cared about anything but whether or not there was liquor left in the bottle'. Williams might not have known where the frontal lobes were located (although he probably did, being a dedicated hypochondriac whose sister's lobotomy left him with a lifelong terror of psychiatric care), but he certainly understood how a human being can navigate without the use of reason. I'm not sure *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is about much else besides irrational compulsions – alcohol, money, sex – and how they can unshape a life.

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The AA meeting was on the Upper West Side at 6 p.m. I slept a while at the hotel and then cut across Central Park, eating a hot dog on the way. The trees were maybe a fortnight away from coming into leaf and as I walked I saw a red cardinal in a bush beside the path. Nothing except changes in climate and language communicate so thoroughly a sense of travel as the difference in birdlife. A week later, on the way to Key West, I'd see vultures circling above Miami, ospreys in the Everglades, an ibis picking its way through a tropical graveyard. Another

week on and thousands of miles north, on the outskirts of Port Angeles, I'd watch bald eagles fishing in a river and clouds of violet swallows swarming above a gorge. But the red cardinal was the first purely American bird of my trip and it heartened me. Whatever happens, happens here, in the populated earth. I was grateful for the science lesson, but I didn't want to divorce the neural drama of alcoholism from the world, the quick and grubby world in which it takes place.

No chance of that at AA. I sat at the back, with an old-timer, Andi, who'd offered to show me around. People were drifting in, clutching coffees, in baseball caps and suits. It seemed at first glance almost comically New York, right down to the couple in the front row who looked like rock stars, one in enormous sunglasses and leather shorts, the other swaddled in a floor-length fur coat.

There was a sign on the wall that displayed the Twelve Steps, next to one that read 'No spitting. No eating food on shared computers.' The combination would no doubt have amused John Cheever, who struggled for a long time with the democracy of these dingy rooms, though in his last years he softened in his loathing of AA, becoming vocally grateful for its role in his sobriety. I read through them, step by step, for the hundredth time.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

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5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

No one knows for sure how AA works. It was from the very beginning a gamble, a shot in the dark. It was established in the 1930s by a doctor and a failed stockbroker, Dr. Bob and Bill W., both of whom suffered from alcoholism themselves. Among its central tenets are the beliefs that recovery depends upon a spiritual awakening, and that alcoholics can help one another by sharing their experiences: a kind of bearing witness that proved from the outset astonishingly powerful. As a statement by AA World Services puts it: "Together, we can do what none of us could accomplish alone. We can serve as a source of personal experience and be an ongoing support system for recovering alcoholics."

I'd come to an open meeting. We all joined hands in the little room to singsong our way through the Serenity Prayer. *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.* I had a flash of that tiresomely English reluctance to join in, the suspicion of group identities.

The speaker was a man in his forties, with fine dark hair and a beautiful, ravaged face. He spoke in a meandering, elegant way. Alcohol was the family disease. His father pushed him to succeed. He was gay, attempted suicide as an adolescent and at a late stage in his drinking stopped going out entirely, barricading himself in his apartment with crates of red wine. He used to suffer from blackouts and as he explained this period of vanishing from society he used another of those images that lodged itself painfully in my mind. He said: 'It was like my life was a piece of cloth that I had shredded down to lace and then I tore the connections away until there was nothing left.' Eventually he checked into a recovery programme and after that he stayed sober, even when – and here, for just a minute, he looked exhausted – his partner killed himself. No alcoholic ever dies in vain, he said then, because their story might be the one thing that catalyses someone else's recovery.

After he'd finished speaking, which might have been half an hour, the group gave their responses. Each person began by saying their first name, the nature of their addiction and the length of their sobriety, with the rest chanting back in unison, 'Hi Angela, Hi Joseph . . .' At first it seemed theatrical. There was evidently a clique at the front, and their responses were annoying a man beside me. 'Oh GROSS,' he kept saying. 'Oh fuckin' love, love, love.'

I had some sympathy for him, but the next stage made me change my mind entirely. People were asked to put up their hands if they

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were celebrating a sobriety birthday that month. Some hadn't touched alcohol for years; some for decades. An Indian man stood up and said: 'I can't believe my son is eighteen this week and that he's never seen me or my wife drunk.' It hadn't really dawned on me before how much of a fellowship AA is, or how powerfully it depends on people wishing to pass on the help and friendship that's been offered to them. By the time the closing prayer began I was close to tears. 'Right?' Andi said, nudging me, and I nodded back. Right.

We said goodbye at the kerb and I walked to the subway alone. I'd forgotten my coat but it didn't matter. The air was almost warm and the moon was very high in the sky, bright as a nickel, ripe as a peach. On the corner I passed a little girl of eight or so roller-skating outside an apartment building. She was hanging on to the hands of a Puerto Rican woman I assumed must be her nanny and whirling in circles, calling out in an imperious voice: 'Again! Again! I'll just do one more!' One more. It must at some time or other have been the rallying cry of every man and woman in that meeting. As I turned down towards the Elysée I could still hear her shouting 'Seven! Eight! Ten!' as she completed each triumphant, greedy circuit.

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I'd made these two small pilgrimages as a way of immersing myself in the subject of alcoholism (an approach, now I came to think about it, not dissimilar to John Cheever's preferred method of swimming in cold water: leap in, preferably buck naked, no namby pamby fiddling about on the side). What hadn't occurred to me, foolishly, was that