

diary of a boozer

(off the booze)

By
Jeff Hughes

General Note on the Diary.

Each diary entry will be written on the date specified. It will be edited for grammar at the end of this eight-week dry run but the thoughts will not be altered in any way. How I feel at the moment of writing is how I feel.

January 23, 2017

I drink.

But what I've done over the last decade plus is more than just drinking. I've made bars a central preoccupation of my life.

Hard day's work? Edge offers at 5 o'clock.

Traveling to Spiddal, Ireland...Dinan, France...Groveland, California? Pints in the oldest bar a must and texts to my uncle will follow. (Can't go wrong with Tigh Hughes, Saint-Saveur and Iron Door respectively.)

Theatre tickets? Drinks before. If it's good or really bad, way more drinks after.

Bears game on? Josie Woods for endless Coors Lights.

Most of the great stories of my life have occurred with a drink in my hand.

Since 2003 there have probably been three weeks where I didn't have a single drink. Two of which involved devil viruses that left me sweating through tee-shirts on a dirty couch, coming to-and-fro consciousness during random episodes of the *Twilight Zone*.

The other just wrapped. It is the first of eight intended weeks without a drop of alcohol. Why? Because I'm hitting the reset button on my drinking life.

I never wanted booze to become routine. I never wanted to lose the enjoyment of that first sip of Guinness. And I have. I stopped deriving pleasure from the experience. It just became a thing I did. I took a shit before I let the house in the morning. I drank beers at night. Bar, couch, it didn't matter.

This eight weeks is a pilgrimage and my Canterbury Cathedral is remembering why I love drinking in the first place.

And as confident as I was in this endeavor, I'm starting the diary on Day Eight because who the fuck knew if I'd make it this far?

Coming off a wild weekend in New Orleans, I had theatre tickets Thursday night with the lady and the NFL conference championship games Sunday. Vegas had me 4-1 to make it to Monday morning.

What did I learn over the first seven days?

1. I'm not an actual alcoholic. You might think this is a small thing but it was refreshing to not crave alcohol at any point over this initial week. I didn't get the shakes or panic attacks. I didn't even have night sweats, which fucking shocked me.
2. Twice I was able to sit in my local for multiple hours, drinking club soda with a splash of orange juice, and exist. What's bizarre is how your mindset changes. First, it's cheap as shit. Second, I didn't have to walk into the door of the Copper Kettle and write off the remainder of the day. I could walk out later and watch a movie, cook dinner, write. The lady didn't have to expect me to return to the apartment and fall onto the couch like a bag of shit and start snoring before the end of *60 Minutes*.

3. The lady and I saw the brilliant *Oh Hello!* on Broadway Thursday night. We had dinner at a Mexican bar/restaurant in Hell's Kitchen first. Club soda. I wanted the Negra Modelo on tap – because Negra Modelo on tap is like drinking beer directly from sweet keg of the Lord Almighty – but...club soda. Splash of orange juice. We left after some great tacos and popped into an Italian restaurant for coffee and dessert. Coffee and dessert. Who knew? (All the non-drinkers, that's who.) Then I walked into a Broadway house to see a show without a drink in me for the first time in at least a decade. Was the night different? Very. Was the night great? It sure was. It didn't make me wanna stop drinking altogether, by any means, but it showed me there were laughs and good times to be had without it.

I tried this last year as something of a challenge to myself. This year it's different. It's a quest. And this diary, who knows, maybe it'll become something I share with people who are actually struggling with booze. Or maybe it'll be something I never show another person.

Either way...cheers.

January 24, 2017

The second part of not drinking for 8 weeks is going to the gym, every day, for that entire period. There are four kinds of people at the gym.

- **Survivors.** These are people like me who are there so we don't die before 60. We do cardio and weight machines and fuck around with medicine balls like we're training Jack Dempsey in 1919. We don't actually have a fucking clue what we're doing but we know sweating is a good thing so we sweat a lot and go home. The survivor's number one goal when they enter the gym is to get the fuck out of the gym.
- **Flies.** These are people you look at and wonder, "Do you ever go anywhere else?" They have muscles in places you didn't know existed and seem to spend hours chatting between the actual lifting of things. When they do lift things they grunt loud enough to make Monica Seles shit her pants. They are always drinking thick, weirdly colored beverages out of unmarked plastic bottles.
- **Whores.** These are people who spend way too much time on their appearance before they come to the gym. The guys use hair gel, fucking HAIR GEL, and then work out. What happens when that shit sweats into your eyes? The woman have their outfits planned out to the point where they know the angle the ripped tee shirt will dangle quietly off the left shoulder. They know people are looking and they soak up every moment. I call them 'whores' only because I imagine their goal in coming to the gym is getting fucked in the shower.
- **This One Broad.** I was on an elliptical recently and there was a woman, all of 25, on the elliptical to my left. She was speaking on her cell phone, holding it in her right hand. In her left hand was a cup of coffee. I have nothing else to say about this girl other than I immediately, and without reservation, hated everything about her.

I'm not weighing in. Not making this about physical appearance. I don't want to let short-term success impact long-term goals. 8 weeks with a shit load of exercise and no booze...can't be a bad thing.

January 25, 2017

I woke up and wanted to drink. Not at that moment, it was 5:15 in the goddamn morning. But as I sipped coffee on the couch and watched Rick Steves weasel his way through fucking Latvia I felt a little sad that I wouldn't be drinking again for 51 days.

So what does that mean? Well, for one thing, it's clear I'm not going to be going on the dry permanently. No, that was never the goal but part of me wondered if I would lose the taste for it the way people who give up fast food for Lent find themselves pretty happy not to pull into that drive-thru after Easter.

It also means this is going to be harder than I expected. If I'm dreaming of frothy pints of Guinness on Day Nine, I could end up jerking off in the window of the Copper Kettle by the middle of next week.

January 26, 2017

I was at the gym at 7:30 this morning. Let me tell you something. That ain't happening if I have ten pints of Guinness in the system from the night before. My normal routine is to wake up before six, feed the cats and drop in and out of consciousness for three hours while spilling coffee on my torn underwear.

On Day Ten a few things are very clear. I'm sleeping better. I have way more energy. And my production levels are through the roof. It's almost like booze is bad is for you.

January 27, 2017

"His name was Costanza. He killed my mother."

Let me walk you through last night.

The lady and I ate dinner around six o'clock. I went to sleep around ten thirty. In between those two events were four hours which, during this period of intense sobriety, I needed to KILL.

And that's the right language. Kill. Sure, the games of iPad Scrabble are fun. Yes I enjoyed the *Seinfeld* reruns, seeing three smart people fumble an easy Arthur Miller/*Death of a Salesman* Final Jeopardy and watching *Mad Max: Fury Road* for the 115th time. (It is a piece of pure cinema; a masterpiece of uncommon visual dimension.) But I will never understand how so many people live like this day in and day out. They go to work. Come home. Watch TV. Go to sleep. Repeat. How? How do they do it without suffocating from the boredom of it all?

Ultimately, this is The Boozer's Dilemma. Because I went to a bar one night, I met the woman I love, who shares my home and kitties. Because I went to a bar one afternoon I met a girl who ended up handing me her job at as Assistant General Manager of the Helen Hayes Theatre on Broadway (which subsequently led to my entire theatre career). Because I went to a bar one morning in Chicago I met Rick Pearson, the chief political writer for the Tribune, who's become one of my favorite people on the

planet. So many of the great laughs I've had, the interesting stories I've heard, the fascinating people I've met...so many of them are the result of "because I went to a bar".

Nothing happens to you when you sit on your couch. Nothing is ever gonna happen to you when you sit on your couch. Nothing interesting is going to knock on your door, unless your drug dealer has your home address. The best episode of the best TV show is still just a fucking TV show and with On Demand technology you could watch that at 8 AM and have the same experience.

I'm getting edgy. I need a drink.

January 28, 2017

Last night the lady went out and I stayed home. In the past, the lady going out would mean I spend the night guzzling Guinness down the street and pass out well before she returns, leaving a plume of Guinness fart from the front door to the bedroom.

Last night, I watched *Schindler's List*.

I know what you're thinking. "How great that you watched *Schindler's List* on Holocaust Remembrance Day!" Well, yes, it *was* Holocaust Remembrance Day. I just didn't realize that until the Schindler Jews had already been liberated by that Russian dude on the horse. I watched *Schindler's List* because I really like *Schindler's List*. I don't know who holds the record for having seen *Schindler's List* the most times but I have to think I'm top ten.

I should have started this entry with "Dear Kitty".

January 29, 2017

Last night we went to the Kettle for dinner. No big deal. Had the ribs. Not bad. Met some friends. Spent three hours hanging and it wasn't really uncomfortable.

Then something interesting happened.

As the lady and I were basically ready to walk out the door, other friends walked in and ordered drinks. This was probably 10 o'clock. And this is the point where all my other nights out would find their second wind and I'd be off and running. Convincing the lady to have "one more", buying rounds...etc. This was the moment in the past where a night out turned into a session.

I left.

If I'm not watching a game, or watching the golf, I've learned I have a window for being in a bar without drinking. It's probably three hours. After that point it's just too much club soda (splash of OJ). Too many trips to the bathroom.

But really it's simpler than that.

Forget the booze.

Say you love crossword puzzles. They're your favorite thing. And one night you go to a party and everybody in the room is doing a crossword puzzle. But you...you're not allowed to do one. If you stayed home, you wouldn't give a shit. At home you can totally forget the outside world exists. But at the party, you have to watch each person fill in those little boxes. And it would take nothing for you to grab a newspaper and a pencil and just go to town but you FUCKING CAN'T.

It's not hard to become jealous pretty damn quick.

January 30, 2017

Day 14.

2 weeks.

25% of the way to the Promised Land.

When I go to sleep tonight I will have not touched alcohol for a fortnight...for the first time since I started drinking alcohol.

I'd love to celebrate this achievement. But the only way I know how is not allowed.

January 31, 2017

This hasn't been easy. I'm having fun writing this diary but I'm probably downplaying how legitimately hard it's been to do what I've been doing. And this morning I woke up and realized I HAVE SIX FUCKING WEEKS OF THIS SHIT LEFT.

What's keeping me going?

The weight loss.

No, I am not making this eight weeks about losing weight. I haven't even weighed myself. But based on the at least ten pounds I've dropped so far and the reemergence of the bones in my face, I'm now fascinated to see how I'm going to look on March 17th when this is done.

Here was the math I did yesterday.

Having gone to the gym every day for fourteen days, I figure I've burned an average of 600-700 calories with each visit. Let's take the low end and call it 6. $600 \times 14 = 8400$ calories.

Then let's say I average 6 beers a day. I pile em up on weekends so I think that's fair. And let's take Guinness as the barometer, at 125 calories per. That's 10,500 calories.

So in the two weeks I got 18,900 calories less in the system from just the workouts and not drinking. That means when this thing is done I will be sitting at about 100,000 calories less. That's borderline

insane and probably says more about how I was living before these eight weeks than how I'm living during them.

February 1, 2017

I miss the drinking, not the drink.

Coming home from the gym today I popped into the Kettle just after they opened. Somewhere around 10:30. The only people in there were Pat the owner, Brogy the bartender and Marie the waitress. I spent ten minutes in there chatting. The topic? My not drinking.

Listen, I know I'm annoying about this whole process with other people. When you drastically change one of the fundamental elements of your life, it's very hard to think about much else.

But what's been interesting is how other people have responded. Some are generally surprised I've made it this far. Some keep waiting for me to fall back into the ocean. But a few seem genuinely perplexed that I've been able to do it and don't seem miserable.

It's not that I don't *seem* miserable. It's that I'm *not* miserable.

I miss the drinking, not the drink.

And as long as I can go hang in a bar with my club sodas (splash of orange) for a few hours, **March 17th feels more like the finish line to a race than the end of a prison sentence.**

February 2, 2017

"When Chekhov saw the long winter, he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But standing here among the people of Punxsutawney and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn't imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter." -Phil Connors, Groundhog Day

You know what's strange? So many people have asked me this question:

WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO FOR THE SUPER BOWL IF YOU'RE NOT DRINKING?!?!

I don't know, just watch the fucking Super Bowl. (I wish there was a font called Intense Sarcasm.)

People always assume boozers get boozed up at the wrong times. The Super Bowl, New Year's Eve, St. Patrick's Day do nothing for us. We drink about 300 days a year. Why would we want to get drunk the times everybody else does?

The truth of this process has been that a good sporting event on television is what's saving me. It's when there's no sports on television, especially at night, that I want to rip the flesh off my face. Super Bowl Sunday is a gold mine for me. I have something to occupy me.

Monday is the problem.

February 3, 2017

I looked down the barrel of a pint of Guinness last night.

Down the Kettle to pull the numbers for the Super Bowl boxes, a buddy of mine came in and ordered a pint of the muck. I look at it, the way a convict looks at a woman after ten years in the can. I would have done things to that Guinness. Things you shouldn't do to a beverage. Things you should never do in public.

Here's a haiku:

I wanna get drunk
On my dark and frothy gold
And fart. Oh yes, fart!

February 4, 2017

This diary can't just be about how much I want to drink booze for the next 41 days, can it? I have a feeling that will get boring.

Last night I saw Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* at the American Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria. And I had the response I always have when I sit through a great piece of film or theatre. It made me want to run from the theatre, buy a notebook and pen at the local bodega and just start writing on a park bench. (It's way too fucking cold currently to do that.) *King* is not only a great movie. It's a wholly unique one. It's dark and funny and exciting and unlike anything that was put on film before it.

In a lot of ways it's the precursor to many movies I have loved since. *Joe Versus the Volcano* has some of its bizarre tendencies. *The Cable Guy* and *Death to Smoochy* take on the same basic themes with a deeper layer of darkness. These characters need to perform. But more to the point, they need to be loved.

I wouldn't have been in that theater last night if I were drinking. I would have been drinking. But there's always something going on in this city to occupy my time if I have the financial wherewithal to take advantage. Screening. Play. Singer. Exhibition. Something is always going on and I'm taking advantage now.

February 5, 2017

Super Bowl Sunday.

A bit of history.

The original intention of this eight-week booze sabbatical was to start tomorrow, the day after the Super Bowl. When the scheme was originally hatched it was only going to be a month. But then New Orleans happened. I boozed myself out. The start date got moved up. The length was extended.

One interesting development has been the reaction of people in the Kettle to all of this. They still see me sitting there, drinking my pints of club soda (splash of orange). They must assume I'm pounding 10-12 vodkas in an hours because that's the rate I'm putting back the clubs.

Then I just leave, something else they're not used to. And I get the "where ya going?" Then I have to explain the whole thing and you know what the most common response I'm getting is?

Good. For. You.

I get the sense many want to do something similar. I get the sense many people realize they are in a drinking rut and don't have the motivation to do anything about it. This fucking process is hard and boring and tiring and frustrating and can leave a venerable boozier wanting to rip limbs off if only to give himself something to do.

It's also the healthiest I've felt in a decade.

My buddy Matt and I have Patriot 0, Falcons 7 in the \$500 box. If your final score is 30-27 Pats, we clear twenty-five grand. If we clear twenty-five grand, the diary will have a different tone tomorrow.

February 6, 2017

Yesterday I sat in the window of the Kettle and watched the Super Bowl, slamming club soda (splash of OJ) like I'd spent the previous three weeks in the desert. To my left was John Brogan, day barkeep at the Kettle, who takes off the drink from January 2 until Palm Sunday every year. In front of me Pdraig, the former barkeep at a joint on Queens Boulevard, now working in the city, who does the same. There we were, the 4S - Super Sunday Sobriety Society.

Today I remember every snap of the Super Bowl. I woke up this morning at 5 am and was able to write a coherent, eight-point piece on the game. You might think "remembering every snap of the Super Bowl" is not a noteworthy point but let me tell you...it sure as hell is. Normally these games are viewed through a boozy haze and most of my memories of them come from the endless highlights I see in the days that follow.

Yesterday I made a decision. I don't know if five weeks from now I'll stick with it but the decision was made in that front window. From my birthday weekend until St. Patrick's Day – every year moving forward – I'm not drinking. For ten months a year, I can booze it up. And for two, I'll hit reset.

February 7, 2017

Week four begins today.

Forget about what I said yesterday. I'm definitely not doing this every year.

February 8, 2017

I told someone yesterday that I hadn't been drinking. And their question was, "Have you gained any weight?"

"Why would I gain weight?" I asked.

"I've heard people who quit drinking gain weight because they compensate for lack of booze with other foods."

How much food do you have to eat to compensate for a dozen Guinness every day? Is that the problem alky scotch drinkers have? They stop hitting the Dewars and turn to profiteroles?

Every day I realize more and more how most people have no issue having three beers or so and calling it a day. I'm envious as hell of that.

February 9, 2017

I bought tickets to see August Wilson's *Jitney* – a play I love – on Broadway Saturday night. The lady and I are going for fancy steak frites on Valentine's Day. We're seeing a jazz singer at Highline Ballroom next Friday night. The week after we're seeing the new Mamet play at Atlantic Theatre Company.

Why?

Because I have extra money now.

That's about \$450 in tickets. I didn't blink.

Every year I go to Chicago, usually for a week. During that week the lady and I do everything. Markets, museums, theatre, comedy shows, jazz...etc. We soak the city up. We never do that in New York, the city we live in.

That's changed during this drinkless run. And it's becoming one of the great lessons of this period. If the two of us go out to a bar for the night, the bill is inevitably \$150. That's tickets to a potentially great play. That's hearing music we've never heard before. That's filling our lives with something that can greatly enhance them.

Priorities. Drinking is great. And we're still going to do it. But I've learned over the first three and a half weeks of this eight week run that it's time to stop complaining about the things I don't like about NYC and start taking advantage of everything it has to offer. If that means sacrificing a few nights out, so be it.

Chicago has been the mistress and we've fucked the shit out of her. It's time to start fucking the wife.

February 10, 2017

When I had conversations with non-boozers I was amazed by the amount of shitty TV they watched. Shows about pawn shops. Shows that spend an hour remodeling a motorcycle. Shows on network television! Well after 24 days of life on the wagon, I have to say...I get it.

If you live with another person, and you're hellbent on not going out, there is very little you can do communally on the average weeknight besides watch TV. You can read, sure. But that's a solitary endeavor. You can write but if you're like me and you've been writing all damn day the last thing you want to do at night is continue fucking writing. (Also, if reading is solitary, writing is *extremely* solitary.)

TV. That's it.

It's right there in front of you and you pay for it so why not? But TV is a lot of crap. We pay for about 250 viable channels, I'd say. (The numbers go to like 1000 but about 75% of them show things that a human being would never watch.) On the 250 channels, at any given moment, there's 3 things TOPS that don't make me want to scream into a pillow.

I find myself watching food channels all night long. Shows where people compete against each other using shitty ingredients. Shows where bald guys go to cities and eat stuff. I don't give a shit about single thing on the screen but that doesn't stop me from weighing in on every single moment.

Today is Friday. Tonight is Friday night. And there are about 30 episodes of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* on. 35 days left.

February 12, 2017

"Car service"

If you've never seen an August Wilson play, I don't know how to describe them to you. The sets, the characters, the dialogue are all intensely naturalistic but you are somehow hovering above the realm of the natural; between the world of the poetic and the spiritual. Plot's not too big a concern for August. He's after your soul. Plot is how he gets to it.

Jitney, for me, has always been a play about how we define ourselves in the world. (Yes, something I've been thinking an awful lot about lately.) How do we establish and pronounce who we are?

The character Fielding is a drunk.

Turnbo is a gossip.

Youngblood is a man trying to do right.

The complications in the play come from the father/son dynamic of Becker and Booster – both struggling to define themselves because their identities are so wrapped up in one another. Becker is unfulfilled because he does not have a son, a namesake, of which to be proud. Booster is unfulfilled because he lacks his father's love.

My identity won't be wrapped up in booze anymore. I'm going to drink. I'm going to enjoy the hell out of life. But I don't want it to be the first line in my obituary. "Jeff Hughes was fun to drink with." There's got to be more than that.

February 13, 2017

Listen, I never promised you this diary was going to be fucking *Ulysses*. It was never going to be a tome you kept at the bedside for years, nightly pulling a few new nuggets from a deeper reading of the material. Today will be day 28, four weeks, a full month...and honestly I'm not sure how much more I'm going to be learn.

February 14, 2017

I am bored out of my mind.

I write all day. That starts as early as 8 or 9 in the morning and goes pretty strong until 5 or 6 in the afternoon. Last night when I finally closed the computer, I looked up and it was 5:45 and I thought, "Holy shit, what am I gonna do for the next five hours?"

Not drinking during the week won't be hard come mid-March because I will have the weekends and the Guinness. But right now, with the weekends no different from the week days, with every day seemingly blending into one blurry exercise in How Much Cable TV Can I Watch, I'm just bored.

There's nothing I can do. My buddy Matt said that this was a dumb time to take this on because without golf I'd want to kill myself. He may have been right. I could be at the range at night in April or May. But once it gets warm, I REALLY wanna drink so that wouldn't have worked either.

For the next month, I just have to embrace the boredom. That's my life until March 17. Keep working. Keep writing. Take advantage the insane amount of lucidity that comes from sobriety. But understand, it ain't gonna be exciting.

February 15, 2017

Profiteroles.

Puff pastry filled ice cream. The whole deal covered in warm chocolate sauce and topped with shaved almonds.

Profiteroles. Quite possibly my favorite thing.

I never really knew about how good desserts at restaurants can be. When you drink, you don't go down that road. You have your 3-5 beers during dinner and by the time the meal itself is over, you're either ready to swing over to the bar or head to the next joint to properly finish the night. You don't even consider a cup of coffee and a chocolate mousse, or crème brulee, or some goddamn slap-your-ass profiteroles.

This newfound passion ain't helping in the weight loss department. But sure is softening the fall of sobriety.

February 16, 2017

I do an hour on the elliptical 5 days a week. The biggest hurdle for me every session is not the physical part, that isn't very hard. It's the intense boredom. I can put on a soccer game. I can watch golf. I can throw on endless episodes of *The West Wing*. It doesn't matter. There will still be a moment when I look up and realize only like 11 minutes have gone by and then the boredom sets in.

That stops once I hit minute 31. Because minute 31 means we're coming down the other side of the mountain. My brain sees minute 31 as 9 minutes away from being 20 minutes til the end. Yes, I know that's mathematically insane but it works for me.

Today is minute 31. Somehow the breakdown of this two months off ended up being 59 days, thanks to the strategic involvement of February. Yesterday was day 30. So I now have fewer days remaining of sobriety than I've already achieved.

And as the time goes on it will become important as hell that I have a game plan for when this thing ends. I don't want to end up carving my name in the wood like Brooks in *Shawshank* because I'm not used to not asking the grocery store manager for a piss. I can't go back to the gym only three days a week. Can't go back to the 24 oz. Coors banquets every night for no apparent reason. Can't go back to three beers before and after every movie like it's fuel on the *Fury Road*. (No more movie references.)

I have 29 minutes to put together a structure. Plenty of time.

February 18, 2017

Let me tell you about yesterday.

My work day ended around 3:45, at my buddy's place near Lincoln Center. I had two hours to kill before a dinner reservation at 6 on 15th Street. For the last 2-3 years, this would have been an easy few hours. Hop on a train downtown to a bar in the general vicinity and drink for a few hours. Not yesterday.

I walked, almost out of instincts, out of nostalgia, out of remembrance of how I once stalked the cultural streets of this city, to the box office at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. (This is one of the great underground movie theaters in New York. I don't mean underground in any kind of cool sense. It's literally under the ground.)

I saw a listing: *Julieta*. Sounded Spanish. "Does Almodovar have a new one?" I thought. I hadn't missed one of his films in the theater from *All About My Mother* to *Volver*. I walked over to a pillar where the New York Times review was printed out as a one-sheet and read. Almodovar. Positive.

I bought a ticket, took the escalator down and there I was again. Seeing a Spanish film in the middle of a weekday afternoon. I can't lie. I felt like myself again. I texted Eric, my longest friend on this earth, and there was genuine excitement in his responses. This is who I was for a decade. Was this who taking a few months off from the drink had returned me to?

The movie wasn't great. But it didn't need to be. You don't wake up from a coma and complain about the weather.

February 19, 2017

Last night I had a two-part dream.

Part I: My Lady Left Me

This made me incredibly sad. It was a cold farewell. She was done with me. And there wasn't even the twinge of nostalgia or regret or disappointment on her end. Just...over.

Part II: On the Lam

This made me incredibly nervous. Facing prison time for something, I decided to pack all my things in a suitcase and take an NJ Transit train to the Jersey Shore. I woke up before actually boarding the train but the tension of frantically packing that bag, coupled with the sadness of saying a final farewell to my cats, was overwhelming.

My dreams, or nightmares or whatever, during this period of been vivid. I'm sure someone has done a study on the effects of alcohol on brain patterns during sleep but I sure as shit am not going to read it.

February 20, 2017

Yesterday it was 64 degrees.

In February.

64 fucking degrees.

And it sucked.

Because warm weather makes me think of the beach. And the ocean. And the golf course. And all three of those things make me think about something else: cold beer. Cold. Delicious. Beer.

I would love to be one of those people who see the sun shining brightly in the morning and thinks, "What a lovely day for a bike ride. Oh yes, what a lovely day for a pedal!" I'm cool with bike rides. I'll go for a bike ride with you right now. But when we're done, let's chain the fucking bikes up and drink a case of ice cold Coors Lights.

February 20, 2017 (Volume II)

I just played golf.

Golf makes me wanna drink ice cold beers too.

February 21, 2017

When you're a boozier off the booze, you have to replace booze with something. (I believe AA wants you to go for broke and replace it with God but that would be tricky for me since, you know, I don't believe in some dude in the sky judging me.)

In the bar, it's been club soda (splash of orange).

In the house, it's been tea. A few pots of lemon zinger tea, over ice.

In restaurants, it's been the club soda to start but then coffee and dessert at the end of the meal for punctuation.

Those are replacements for the drink, not the drinking. The drinking is the harder part. But you gotta start somewhere.

February 22, 2017

One thing is becoming clear. I'm going to have to commit to being just generally bored 3-4 days a week. 3-4 days a week are going to be spent sitting on a couch, shuffling through TV stations, watching movies, going to bed around 10 pm.

Friday night, we're doing dinner and a play. Saturday night dinner and a movie at Lincoln Center. Sunday I'll watch golf and sit through the OSCARS. The weekends will be easy, especially when alcohol

resurfaces in a month or so. But it's these Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays that present the bigger hurdle. And the answer might just be doing nothing.

Maybe I'll start coming up phrases, mantras, to be used for when booze returns.

ELIMINATE THE COUCH BEERS.

ENJOY DESSERT.

EMBRACE THE BOREDOM.

Those are my first three. And now they all have to start with E. Goddamnit.

February 25, 2017

Here's how much I love *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

In high school, I used to play a VHS copy of it while I did homework. When the movie was over, I rewound it and played it again. I have every second of that movie memorized.

I've seen every major production done of the play within a few hundred miles of me. (Including a failed attempt to see the play in Warsaw that is still one of the saddest close calls of my travel life.)

Last night I saw David Mamet's newest play, *The Penitent*, at Atlantic Theatre Company. The lady and I left at intermission. Not just because the play was an interminable bore. It was that. But because I felt a terrible sadness sitting in the theatre. The play was nothing. No guts. No soul. Nothing. If the play had been submitted to Neil Pepe at the Atlantic with another playwright's name on the title page it would have been tossed in the trash by page 5.

I walked out of *Jitney* wanting to rush to the keyboard to work on my own stuff. I walked out of *The Penitent* believing there's no hope for the American stage. But still I believe it's important to see bad theatre just as its important to have bad times. They help you appreciate the good ones. Bad plays help you to recognize what goes in to making a good play. The time. The love. The heart.

Want this in a neat bow?

Same thing has been happening with booze. Not drinking the last five weeks, and for the next three, has reminded me what I love about drinking in the first place. I can't wait to get back on the horse, reborn in the booze.

February 26, 2017

Last night the lady and I waited on a line in midtown Manhattan, with two hundred other people, to see a documentary called *I Am Not Your Negro*.

Two hundred people, black and white and every other fucking thing, wanted to swallow hole the words of James Baldwin.

We wanted to soak in his tear-drenched recollections of the Civil Rights movement.

We wanted to know more than we knew before walking into the theater.

We wanted to feel more after the film – more compassion, understanding, whatever – than we had 90 minutes earlier.

Think about this the next time someone bad mouths coastal elites to you. Think about this the next time someone tells you New Yorkers are somehow less American than out of work Wisconsin factory workers.

I choose to be part of the America that strives to do better, to know more and feel more. So did 199 others last night. And I was proud as hell to sit in a dark room with them last night.

February 27, 2017

I've been off the drink for 40 days and 40 nights. Like fucking Moses.

March 1, 2017

Coors Light or Guinness.

That's the debate coursing through my brain almost hourly.

Will my first drink, my return to the boozing life (albeit with a consistent governor), be kicked off with an ice cold Coors Light or a thick, delicious, foamy pint of Guinness?

Yes, I still have sixteen days remaining. Yes, this is not as important as say, health care. But I'm thinking about it. I'm thinking about it a lot.

That's what I miss most during this process. I'm fine with not drinking during the week. Fine with replacing couch beers with couch tea on a Tuesday night. But I can only sustain couch tea if the promise of weekend beers is there. I can't keep drinking tea on Monday and Tuesday and fucking Wednesday if I don't know my post-golf round cold Coors Light or frothy Guinness are waiting for me on Sunday afternoon at the Kettle.

The question is...which one?

March 2, 2017

This Saturday night my buddy is having his birthday dinner. Good spot. Downtown. He texts me. "And it's close to Josies. We can go there after."

Josies is a bar. One of my favorite bars in the world. And Saturday night I can't go there and have a beer.

I deserved this 8 weeks – yes it’s starting to sound more like a prison sentence – because of my behavior over the last several years. But that text pissed me the fuck off.

Why did I let it get here? Why didn’t I go to the gym every fucking day? Why did I think I needed a six pack of beer on my couch on a Tuesday night to get through a fucking Knicks game I don’t care about anyway?

I won’t drink Saturday night. Won’t go to Josies.

But goddamn it this won’t happen again.

March 3, 2017

Jeff: Two more weeks.

Guinness: Yea.

Jeff: Two more –

Guinness: I heard ya.

Jeff: It’s just that –

Guinness: What?

Jeff: It’s an achievement, that’s what I’m saying.

Guinness: I understand that.

Jeff: It’s an achievement.

Guinness: You didn’t cure cancer.

Jeff: I know.

Guinness: There are still people dying of AIDS in Africa.

Jeff: That’s not on me.

Guinness: Of course not but, you know, perspective.

Jeff: I’m not insinuating heroics.

Guinness: You’re not what?

Jeff: I’m not claiming that what I did was heroic. I’m just saying –

Guinness: It’s an achievement.

Jeff: It is. It was hard.

Guinness: Drinking is good.

Jeff: I know.

Guinness: Drinking is fun.

Jeff: Yea, I know.

Guinness: But you fucked it up.

Jeff: I did.

Guinness: You overdid it.

Jeff: I did.

Guinness: There's an old Irish saying.

Jeff: Christ...

Guinness: Listen, you fucking idiot. You just spent six weeks not doing a thing you love because you did the thing too much. You can spend thirty seconds taking in a bit of wisdom from the old country.

Jeff: The old country?

Guinness: Aye.

Jeff: Is every European country 'the old country'?

Guinness: Most of em.

Jeff: Give me the wisdom.

Guinness: Fuck you.

Jeff: Fine.

Guinness: Have you ever been poor?

Jeff: Yes.

Guinness: How poor?

Jeff: I once had no money and wanted to eat so I brought thirty-three dimes to a McDonald's to get three things off the dollar menu. Then I dropped the dimes on the dirty floor and had to pick them up.

Guinness: You have money now?

Jeff: Yea.

Guinness: A man once told me there's no problem with being rich. As long as you don't forget what it feels like to have \$5. If you forget that, the money is useless.

Jeff: You can still buy a shitload of stuff.

Guinness: I didn't say he was a wise man.

March 5, 2017

Something happened yesterday that's a bit hard to explain.

At that birthday dinner I already told you about I watched 7 guys slam beers. Beer after beer. Throwing em back. Every other Saturday night of every year I'd have been one of them. And last night I could have been. I mean, who the fuck would have known? You? I don't have to tell you anything.

The people at that table don't live near me, haven't been engaged in this day-to-day, wouldn't have given a shit if I had 12 beers. The lady is up in Maine. She wouldn't have known if I got hammered and pissed my pants on the couch, until she got home and smelled the couch.

But I didn't. I dropped some cash on the table after dinner and walked out into the freezing fucking cold. I went home. Why? Because I've come this far. I've fucking achieved this much. And I was not going to turn "look what I did for 47 days" into "look what I couldn't do for 60 days". I wasn't going to let this thing of pride possess even the sprinkle (or jimmy) of disappointment.

One of the most important parts of doing this was knowing that I could do it. And I can do it. Surviving last night was crucial.

MARCH 6, 2017

LOOKING GOOD, BILLY RAY

FEELING GOOD, LOUIS

What's so interesting about this process is it has stopped being about alcohol. I don't actually care about the booze anymore. I know I'm going to return to drinking on March 17th and have full control of how I drink moving forward.

What's taken over is the weight loss. The gym every morning before 8. Looking good. Feeling good. I don't worry about the booze going back into my system. I worry about the calories. The shit I eat when drinking. The way I feel the next morning, keeping me from getting my ass down the gym. That's the concern.

March 7, 2017

My five favorite bars, at specific moments in time, ever:

5. Marie's Crisis. NYC. Tuesday nights, Fall, 2002.
4. Original Billy Goat Tavern. Chicago. December 2015-Present (The Pearson Years)
3. Josie Woods. NYC. January 2007.

2. Backpackers. King's Cross, London. Spring. 2003.

1. Tropical Pub. Belmar New Jersey. Memorial Day Monday. 2007.

Honorable Mention: Jazzkeller (Frankfurt, 2003), Milady's (NYC 2003-2008), Tigh Hughes (Spiddal, Every time!), Spring Lounge (WEEDS, whatever year), Jimmy's Corner (Monday nights, Fall 2005), Rumours (Monday nights, BMI Workshop After Parties)

March 8, 2017

Single digits. I have single digit days remaining. That's fucking nuts.

March 9, 2017

I knew Martin O'Reilly. Not well. We weren't close friends, by any means, but I knew him. We played golf.

When I went to a different gym I had to pass his apartment on my walk there. He lives across from a playground. He used to yell obscenities at me through the window. The bald fuck.

He's dead now. Thirty-nine years old.

Last night I saw his body lying in a casket on Queens Boulevard. Heard his daughter sing a song of love and sadness. The smell of funeral parlors is a smell unlike anywhere else on earth. Maybe it's the flowers. Maybe it's whatever they use on the body. It's just different. Maybe it should be.

Why would we waste a moment on this earth? How many have I already wasted, awash in booze on my couch?

No more.

RIP Martin O'Reilly.

March 10, 2017

One week left.

Not having a beer tonight feels stupid. I've done this thing. It's over. I want a beer. But this goddamn arbitrary timeline I set haunts me like Mr. Boogedy. 7 more days.

March 11, 2017

I'm just trying to finish this.

I'm the Yankees and I have an 11-run lead in the seventh inning. I don't feel like wasting my good bullpen arms so I'm bringing out failed starter/long man to get the final nine outs. The fans have left the stadium. The announcers are talking about their favorite TV shows. The Red Sox have pulled their stars.

All that's left is Sinatra. Alexa, play "New York, New York".

March 13, 2017

I started this diary after a week. I'm ending it with four days to go.

I feel healthier than I've felt in years. More productive. I've seen great plays and films and heard great music. I've eaten great meals.

This is my life now. Mine and the lady's. And it took eight weeks off the drink to rediscover what I love about living. Might sound like an overstatement but I kid you not – it happened.

Friday at 11 am I'm going to have a Guinness on St. Patrick's Day.

Slainte.