Lauren's Story: "When There's No Sky Left"

There is a moment of sweet tension as I hold the glass in my hand. The fumes rise to my nose, rich with heather and peat. The color is golden promise. I raise the glass to my lips. I drink. Molten honey in the gut. A nearly inaudible click in the back of my head somewhere. Something begins to flow from my belly to my fingertips. The mind becomes soft and fluid. Images appear. I drink more. Emotions rise to the surface and crystallize. I am feeling deeply now, deeper than I do without the booze. I am seeing the truth of things. I can peer from the peak down into the core. The landscape of the page becomes languid and it seems possible, at last, to get what appears in my head down onto the page accurately, precisely, and completely. I drink more. I begin to write. I write frantically,

feverishly, propelled by the urgent volume of all the perfect sentences pressing up against my brain. I drink more, not wanting to slip even a millimeter from the magical realm, trying to keep myself topped off and maintaining the state of altered perception. Purity. Prismatic perfection. Write. Sip. Write. Sip. And so on, until things become bleary, unclear, swirling concrete weights, black...

4:00 a.m. I wake up with a jangled sense of anxiety in a sour-smelling bed. I rise early, not out of enthusiasm for the day, but because I felt so crappy I can't sleep. I scrabble through the papers lying around my desk and find what I've written the night before. Always that moment of hope – is it as good in the light of day as it seemed under the fuzzy shadow of evening? The first sentence, good, the second, not bad, and then, by the end of that first paragraph... Crap. I've done it again - written the world's best first paragraph (or so I'd thought last night) followed by pages of blither. And now, as my stomach churns and my nerves rattle, I vow I won't do it again. I've made the same vow the day before and broken it, and the day before that, but today will be different.

That was the daily cycle. Of course by this time, which was a few years into my career as a drinking writer, even as I said the words to myself I knew I was probably lying. I knew that by six o'clock I'd be back at my desk, with a glass of scotch in my hand, chasing the muse. And there's the crux of it, really. How could I, a person whose craft depends on piercing through the layers of mucky garbage to get at the shining truth expect to succeed when I began the day with a Big Fat Lie? Did I think there was something alchemical at the bottom of the bottle that I couldn't access any other way? What is it that convinced me I just couldn't write without it?

I don't know exactly when alcohol and writing became connected in my mind, but at some point I knew: writers, Real Writers, drank. A lot. Sometime in my late teens the desire to write and the

craving to be a Real Writer, i.e. one who drank and lived hard, mixed like vermouth and gin, like scotch and soda, like vodka and anything, into a potent potion.

Of course, no cocktail hour is complete without hors d'oeuvres. A little tragedy on toast also helped. Damage. Pain. Suffering. I thought there was something romantic about tear-salted wine and pasted up photos of the dead to inspire me. Dylan Thomas. Margaret Laurence. James Agee. Raymond Carver. Gwen McEwen. F. Scott Fitzgerald.

I had a certain amount of family drama as a child on which to draw. A friend of mine calls it The Writer's Pack 'O Family and Friends. An alcoholic father, an unhappy mother, the loneliness of an only child in a less-than-jolly family. Some illnesses thrown in. Being the 'weird' kid in school: adopted, insecure, bookish, and too eager to please. So I had some small measure of sorrow, I suppose. But at the age of sixteen I apparently didn't think I'd had enough. I left school and married a man ten years my senior and moved with him many hundreds of miles from home. The marriage lasted about six months. It was a comic and predictable failure, but at least it had drawn the line in the sand. I was on my own. I could begin. Some bad things happened. I was hurt in many ways. I had my heart broken more than once. I was raped. I was robbed. I lived on Tang, cream of wheat and sardines for three months at one notably low point. Millions of people have been through much worse, but there were times that seemed plenty bad enough to me.

Maybe you are one of the millions out there looking for a way out from your addiction. If you are, keep reading my story and visit other parts of this NCADD web-site. There is hope – there is help – there is healing.

I wrote a lot in those days, proving my theory about the relationship between creativity, alienation and loneliness. In fact, by the time I was twenty, I did more writing than I did anything else. Miles and miles of astoundingly bad poems which were rejected, wisely, by a number of prominent literary magazines. But I kept going, knowing that rejection was part of being a Real Writer, too. I sat at my little desk at the end of my bed, writing far into the night, filling notebook after notebook with observations and snippets of dialogue and reflections. In the morning I went to my clerical job at a university, and between typing assignments I wrote more. And sometime during that time I began drinking. I don't think I'd turned into an alcoholic then, but I did drink heavily, and I could drink the boys under the table. I began to gravitate to those people who drank like I did. I fell in love and lived with a boxer for four years. He was also a drug addict and alcoholic. Compared to him my

drinking wasn't so bad, so I kidded myself into thinking I didn't have a problem – I was just living the sort of life Real Writers lived: chaotic, troubled, painful, spiky with extreme emotional highs and lows.

For that matter, most people I've met along the road who have been addicted to alcohol and drugs live troubled lives and often affect others badly.

I was nearly thirty when I first admitted to myself that I was an alcoholic. I'd left the boxer by that time and married a rock musician. He neither drank nor did drugs. I think, looking back on it now, that that was part of what attracted me to him. I suspect I was trying to live a life where I wouldn't end up a sodden lush, but would still be interesting enough to feed my 'art'. For the three years we were together I didn't drink either. I also wrote less and less. I began to fear I might not be a Real Writer after all. The night the marriage broke up a girl friend of mine called and asked if I was all right.

"No," I said between sobs.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to go out and get drunk," I said.

It seemed like such a normal thing to do. I mean, here I was, grieving, angry and fearful of the future, and going out and getting blasted seemed like the most obvious course of action at the time. By the end of that evening I was thinking maybe my marriage could be saved if I kept a bottle of vodka stashed in the back of the cupboard. I knew this was crazy thinking, and having been raised around alcoholics, I knew it was alcoholic thinking. I didn't care. I had another drink and wrote a short story about the end of marriage. The husband went. The vodka stayed.

I drank every day for ten years. I wrote again, all the time. Into the night, which by then was ending fairly early, after the bottle of wine was finished. During the day, at my office, when I really should have been doing my job. I became thin and edgy and wild. I lived in bars and cafes and had dangerous friends. My work was full of pain of angst and self-indulgence. I met another man, a good man, a kind man, who seemed to find me interesting, despite my drinking. For some mysterious and magical reason, we fell in love - a feat of wisdom on my part that still baffles me, as

he has no tattoos, doesn't play an instrument and has never been to prison. We married and I managed to stay more or less upright through the ceremony.

My life became less wild, but my drinking continued, increased, bloated and swelled. The good man I had married began to ask pointed questions about the amount of scotch that was disappearing every time he went on a business trip. He'd leave and there'd be ¾ of a bottle. He'd get back three days later and there'd be ¼ of a bottle. Of course, what he didn't know was that I would have drunk that ¾ of a bottle the first night, replaced it the next day, drunk that, replaced it with another and meant to have drunk only a quarter of that, but well, drunk ¾ of it instead. At night I would wait until everyone on my street was sleeping and then tip-toe from house to house in my pajamas and parka, leaving empty bottles in other people's recycling bins. By the end of the fifth year, I didn't write at all any more. I just drank and fell asleep and woke up and vowed I wouldn't drink anymore and then, a couple of hours later, when my stomach stopped churning, I started to think about drinking again, and I'd go to the store and tell myself I'd just have one or two and by ten o'clock I was passed out cold.

One day my husband told me, through tears, that he didn't think I was on his side any more. He was right. I wasn't on anybody's side. There was no side, just a great, polluted sea and me bobbing in the middle, losing my grip on the slippery spar of reality. I'd like to say I quit drinking as soon as I knew this, but I didn't. It took another couple of years of misery before I'd had enough.

I was one of the lucky ones. I didn't die or go crazy or end up in jail. I found help and stopped drinking and it's been quite a few years now since the compulsion to drown myself has gone away.

I have heard it said that "Alcohol gave me wings, then it took away the sky." So it was for me. In fact, the real reason I stopped drinking was not, I am somewhat ashamed to say, because I knew how much I was hurting those who loved me, or even that I was trying to save my own life. The reason I quit drinking was that it wasn't working for me any longer. It wasn't making me feel good. It wasn't making me funnier, smarter and certainly not prettier, as I believed it had when I first began using it. It used to relax me – at the end it made me edgy and tense. It used to make me more confident, at the end it only made me afraid of where it would lead. It used to make me feel like I belonged, at the end it made my friends and loved ones avoid me. It used to open the door to that sacred space, that temenos, where the words floated around, waiting to be plucked from the air and put on the page. It sure as hell wasn't doing that any more, nor had it been for a long time.

Alcohol had promised me a relief from pain, from insecurity, from alienation, had promised me joy and pleasure. It had fulfilled its promise for a while and there had been some great times, but the price was huge. For so long there had been nothing but the opposite of everything I had been promised, and as far as writing was concerned there was only the terrifying silence of the void.

With the alcohol gone the question remained. Would I be able to write, to be a Real Writer, without it? I knew I wasn't able to approach writing through the same gate. I had to find a new door, one that didn't rely on the dubious enchantment of transformative elixirs. I went back to school. Humbled, I chose to learn my craft the old fashioned way. I studied;, I found a mentor (interestingly, someone who also suffers from this disease), I practiced. Like a violinist, I spent hours daily training myself. It was slow work, but slow was good. I learned not to be afraid of stillness, to find the truth in my hushed mind, and I began to use the page as a place to sift through the chaos of my life and begin to make meaning.

Since that time I've met hundreds of writers and I am always amazed at how many of them, both successful and struggling, are alcoholic. It's the chicken and the egg, of course. Are we writers because we're drunks and the isolation, the self-obsession, the melancholy of that disease lends itself to a writer's lifestyle, or is it the writer's life that leads to drink? For myself, I know I was born alcoholic, coming from a long line of drunks. But I also know that there are certain character traits that all the alcoholics of my acquaintance seem to have. We are insecure, brittle, over-sensitive to criticism, desperate for approval and praise, prone to depression and appallingly selfish. We are egomaniacs with insecurity complexes. Also, alcoholics often come from fairly damaging families, and that can make us hyper-aware of other's motivations. We have to know what's going on in other people's heads; often our survival as children depended on it. These are useful traits if you're going to be a writer, if you spend your days trying to get the truth of people onto the page in a way that resonates to others.

As an alcoholic I must watch myself carefully, ever vigilant for such character defects as negativity, resentment, jealousy, fear, anger, and self-pity, the emotions that will lead me back to a drink. And when I find them present, I am required, if I want to stay sober and continue writing, to attempt to confront them, analyze them, come to terms with them and transform them into optimism, forgiveness, generosity, faith, serenity and concern for others. I say attempt because, let's face it, I rarely manage to do any of those good and soulful things very well. The point is to keep trying. Practicing, on a daily basis, this sort of scrutiny, is not only good for the soul, but its damn good for

the art as well. The world becomes what Native North Americans call a Medicine Wheel. It teaches me, and provides me with a way to give back, if only in a small way, to the very world that formed me. I become an observer, not only of myself, but of others as well.

Over time, Like NCADD's founder, Marty Mann, I went to AA; I admitted I was powerless over alcohol and that my life had become unmanageable. Had I not stopped drinking, I believe I would have died an early and horrible death. I came to admire strong, spiritual women in AA who were willing to be honest and do whatever it took, on a daily basis, to stay sober. admit that their lives had become unmanageable. Like NCADD's founder, Marty Mann, I got sober in AA, and had to admit that I was powerless over alcohol. I was heading for death. The disease I have almost killed me.

When I was drinking there was very little restraint of pen or tongue, I'd open my mouth and speak before thinking, I'd write without editing, without contemplation. As a recovered alcoholic, I have the luxury of time in which to make sense of things. I try and listen as much as I talk. I try and edit as much as I free-write. My life becomes better and so does my craft.

Am I grateful for being an alcoholic? No, not really. It would have been lovely not to live they way I did for all those years. However, I believe that every life has dark periods and regret, for me at least, comes only when I can't move past those points, when I can't find a way to make healthy use of them in the present. I don't know why so many writers are alcoholics, can't decide which condition comes first, but this much I do know: I would not be the writer I am if I hadn't lived through the experiences I have, and I wouldn't be the writer I am if I didn't now use the very same tools I use to stay sober and apply them to my work as a writer.

It's been a number of years since I've had a drink, and a number of years since I've wanted one. The desire for booze has been replaced by a renewed desire to be a fine writer. I'm still obsessive, still a perfectionist, still insecure, egocentric, and on many days, wracked with self-doubt. The difference is that now I don't try and change that with chemicals. Now I try and get that down on the page.

And isn't it odd than only by putting away the drink, which I was once sure was the mark of a Real Writer, was I able to finally write, consistently, work I could be satisfied with, sometimes even proud of. Day after day, page after page, beginning to end.

I chose recovery over addiction. I have found the joy in gratitude.

I have published and survived failure, mediocrity and success, with my love for both the world and the work intact. At last I became, if only in my own heart, a Real (if imperfect) Writer and it is enough.