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CLEARLY DRUNK [SELVÄSTI JUOVUKSISSA]

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Longing
One More of Something Different
Journal Days 11-0

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“You smell like beer,” yells Felix, age 4, in a loud voice in the entryway of the daycare when I crouch down to zip up the zipper on my daughter’s pink quilted jacket. She takes hold of my neck and rises into the air as if held up by a crane as I straighten up. She laughs and kisses me happily on the face. She doesn’t notice any strange smell. Daddy smells like daddy. Just like always. Like beer.

“Go a year without drinking and write a book about it,” my wife says once when we’ve slipped out of a play at intermission to eat in a nearby restaurant. For me to drink wine.

The latter suggestion feels easy compared to the former. It feels impossible.

And that’s what this is about. I don’t know what will happen to me.

My drinking—or not drinking—is a truly personal issue. As is yours. It isn’t anyone else’s business. Or is it?

And what I drink, regardless of whether it’s called beer, wine, or booze, is exactly the same as what so many others drink. You too? And it affects me, you, and everyone else in exactly the same way.

And that’s what this is about.

That, and the fact that there is only one person’s drinking you can influence.

The Invisible A

I am a 49-year-old academically trained male. I am married, and I have two children. So far life has treated me with kid gloves. Both of my parents are living. I haven't gone through a divorce; I haven't experienced unemployment. As far as I know I am healthy. So things are just right for me. Some might even envy my life.

I step out of my skin and take a look at myself. All is well. That man couldn't have any reason to drink. And there is no indication that he does.

Nevertheless, I am a heavy drinker by any measure. I don't really know exactly how that is defined, but if the week starts on Monday, I've reached the level considered as heavy drinking for men by about Thursday.

I tend to discount all kinds of artificial limits and definitions used to draw various conclusions about other people and their actions. I don't know if this is a function of my personality or the result of a couple of decades of working as a doctor or both. In any case, I've been around long enough to see the dark side of over-enthusiastic diagnoses and medicalization in general.

The definition of heavy alcohol consumption, for example by counting the number of so-called "drinks" consumed in a week, of course has a good aim: to control people's excessive use of alcohol. Artificial tools like this also lighten the burden on healthcare professionals. For many, their abilities, experience, and professional skill are fragile enough that referring to some external truth frees them as it were of their own judgment and responsibility.

Many healthcare professionals also have a need—even more primitive than the genuine, well-intentioned desire to render aid—to influence other people's lives in the name of the value we call health. It is the exercise of power along with the characteristics peculiar to all exercise of power. I am not at all surprised when people talk about health terrorism or health fascism.

Many a healthcare professional's own relationship with alcohol is problematic. Just like other Finns'.

But like a drunk I immediately start to sway off topic, so back to every drunk's favorite person, me.

Am I a drunk? I imagine so. Yes, I am. Quite definitely, yes. And a heavy drinker. Absolutely, regardless of how unreliable the indicators may be.

Am I an alcoholic? I am. I'm not. Maybe. Possibly. How would I know? Should I try to find out? Denial indicates that I am. Likewise raising the question in the first place. But this is intellectualization, a way of distancing myself from the problem. Just another kind of denial. On the other hand, a true alcoholic would deny the whole question from the start.

My friend Kari, a physician by training, says that I'm not. But he's my friend, not my doctor. Maybe he's acting like friends generally do, trying to calm me down, to please me, embellishing the truth. He drinks too much too and admits it. But he drinks less than I do. If I can believe what he says.

So at least I drink too much.

My other friend Leena says that my alcohol use is "socially acceptable." I suppose that most of my acquaintances would answer more or less the same way. But really that's avoiding the question. Because of its social acceptability, a diplomatic answer does not endanger a friendship.

An outsider intimately acquainted with my career as an ethanolist could justifiably say that I lack many of the experiences that would make me a proper alcoholic. I've never been fired or censured because of liquor. In one job interview I was asked directly about my relationship with liquor. I lied that I have so much else going on in my life that I don't have time for boozing. And because the organization in question was mostly male, I added truthfully that I wouldn't spit in a glass either.

I've only missed work once because of a hangover. Another time I woke up late in a strange bed. Hung over then too. It's already been over fifteen years since those events. On the one hand, it certainly would have been wise to stay home more often. Two or three times someone has hinted to me that I stink. I've never received a formal complaint though. But on the other hand, I do the sort of work where the use of intoxicating substances is considered especially reprehensible. I know I'm taking a considerable risk in terms of my income with these very lines. Unlike with my day job, however, I've had dozens of useless or unproductive writing days. But those are almost a part of the writing process, the creative spaces of inactivity.

I've never been caught drunk driving. A few times I've had a real fright getting stopped at an early morning breathalyzer checkpoint. I don't know if I've gotten to continue driving just because of my blowing technique (no, I won't reveal it). On the

morning after a certain Christmas party I was so on the edge that the police took me aside for cross-checks on different breathalyzers. In the end I continued on my way with a final score of 2 to 1.

Not one single personal relationship important to me has ended because of alcohol. One or two may perhaps have failed to begin or shriveled on the vine, but no one pines for what never was. Myself I've consciously withdrawn from many developing—and fun!—relationships with women when I've found that she was able to drink at my pace. Some sort of self-protective mechanism must have been at work there.

Divorce, losing a job, and drunk driving have so far been the most effective external means for treating alcoholism in Finland. Every drunk who has avoided them can continue to lie to himself in peace if he so wishes.

I've never injured myself seriously under the influence of alcohol. One time anything could have happened when I drove a motorcycle into a ditch in France. I survived with an asphalt rash on one side of my face and one dislocated finger, which a thickened joint still reminds me of. I started wearing a helmet the next day. Perhaps the accident was caused by some power more supernatural than wine: President Kekkonen died in Finland at the same minute.

Pink elephants and DT dreams are just oral legends to me. Once a barroom acquaintance insisted I come to his house to see how a potted plant had “really and truly” sprouted from an old scar on his belly.

A few times my grasp on reality has gotten mixed up because of drinking and the lack of sleep associated with it. I've been able not only to read others' thoughts, but to control them too. Unfortunately other people have also seen my thoughts, even the most intimate and secret. I have by dint of my divine decree influenced the flow of future events. My intellectual powers have exceeded all that has been seen so far on the earth in every way.

I've never been in detox. Once I bought a package of naltrexone with a prescription I wrote myself and tried to use it according to the recommendations. I forgot the medication on the second or third day of the course, and that was that. I didn't detect any kind of effect on me or the ethanol in me from the medicine. Otherwise I have never even taken regular non-prescription pain medications for the discomforts caused by my alcohol use.

On the other hand, I have sought outside help on my own initiative when I've felt that I was out of my depth. A few years ago I went to an A-Clinic to discuss my problem with a social worker. I don't know if it did any good. It didn't hurt in any case.

I was always on the lookout to make sure no one I knew was around. I slipped into the stairway, where there were also some church offices. That wasn't a very likely destination for me either in case I suddenly had to explain where I was going. "That too?" In the waiting room I pretended to be reading a book, but I was scanning the other people there waiting. Of course I wasn't like any of them.

The social workers were women. Mine was pleasant and beautifully tanned from the summer. Every time she wanted to talk about drinking. Had I stuck to my goals since our last meeting? Had I had any dry days, like we had decided last time? Did I go over my daily can quotas? Yes. Yes, yes. I thought it was boring to talk about beer cans. I didn't have anything to say about them. Let's talk about something else.

On the social worker's computer desktop was a picture of a GSD. A dog lover. No subject for discussion there either. I realized that I was trying to please the woman. Her beautiful tan was certainly playing a part.

I analyzed, intellectualized my drinking. I talked with the social worker like any two professionals discussing any old case. As if the patient himself were not present. I was hardly the first problem user in her office who had treated problem users himself. I suppose that I was exaggerating my apparent difficulty as her client in my mind.

We met maybe five or six times. Fall went on and the social worker's tan faded. Then the social worker was in an accident and went on a long sick-leave. Our therapy relationship ended and my drinking quickly returned to its previous levels. My work experience benefited me at least to the degree that I didn't start blaming the social worker's injury for my backsliding.

Many a person who has found his way to therapy complains that all they do there is talk; you don't get any therapy there. Did those meetings do me any good? Yes. Undoubtedly. I had sought help for my drinking problem. That is a fact that I can't escape. In some records somewhere there are notes about these meetings. And in some hidden spot I have been tattooed with an invisible A.

Innocent

Most people who have gotten hooked on alcohol start to blame themselves, their own weakness, their slackness, their indecisiveness, their ineptitude, their spinelessness, their inadequacy, their disease, their immorality, their heredity. These are the ones who in their own soul-searching have made it beyond blaming outside factors. Ethanol brings solace for all that too.

It's remarkable how much trouble has been gone to finding explanations for alcohol use based on the individual or the environment. This applies both to activities labeled scientific and people's everyday musings. It seems like their chief result has been to create on the one hand passive acceptance and on the other, feelings of guilt.

But it's still just a molecule we're talking about. Not childhood experiences, heredity, unfortunate accidents, unemployment, job stress, injustice, the harshness and brutality of the world, the lack of understanding of one's fellows, an inhumane environment, arctic hysteria, a lack or excess of money, the "Finnish booze-head," darkness, penduluming alcohol policy, grim visions of the future, a nagging wife, an abusive husband, a shithead boss, or the floundering of one's favorite team. They all exist independent of this molecule.

Neither I nor anyone else is guilty for what the ethanol molecule, and even the idea of it, makes happen in our heads. It works as it should. Blissfully ignorant of its global mission it directly influences the mechanisms that regulate its use.

A true hallucinogenic drug is easier for us to grasp despite its chemical complexity. The limits on their availability make their properties clearer. A drug addict can also blame prevailing circumstances, but his purposeful hunt for the substance does not feed the vicious circle of self-deception. When the acquisition of an intoxicating substance causes exceptional inconvenience, even a willingness to perform illegal acts, we perceive more honestly what we are doing. But in the case of the ethanolist, a veritable river of hundreds and thousands of drunken thoughts flow through his head before he begins to see in which direction the headwaters of addiction lie.

A forty-ish woman walks into my office. She has come to show me a bruise on her upper arm. Her arms are like sticks compared to her otherwise typical middle-aged Finnish

woman's frame. I have met her a few times before. Why has it never occurred to me? Perhaps her troubles haven't been like that.

I am just tactfully leading the discussion towards taking liver tests when the woman says without any warning that she is an alcoholic and drinks a bottle and a half of wine a day. Only then do the tears start to flow. I am supposedly only the second person to know about her problem, the woman says, baring her soul to me. I listen to her cascade, in which in the space of a few seconds dozens of reasons for her drinking swarm by. Sad and tragic events starting in her childhood flash before my eyes as if the woman were fast-rewinding a film on the desk of a film director. She is a good storyteller, despite her excitement. Selects the essential snapshots. Nevertheless I interrupt her flood of words.

"All very regrettable, I'm sure, but none of those things are the reason for your drinking," I say.

The woman is taken aback for a moment, but then soon gets back into her rhythm. She tells about how her drinking began and how things then got out of hand bit by bit. The woman has a husband and a secure job. Except for the bruise, she is healthy. She says she drinks her bottle-and-a-half between five and ten o'clock in the evening. In the morning she is in shape for work.

This sounds depressingly familiar. There is absolutely nothing in this woman that resembles me. And besides, she drinks wine. And I drink beer. In other words exactly the same stuff. And even from five to ten. It would have to be.

"And you blame yourself for your drinking?" I inquire.

The woman's expression is even more dumbfounded.

"Who else?"

"Forget looking for a reason or assigning guilt. The reason for your drinking is the drink itself. Not you or anyone else. You can't blame a chemical or its properties."

"Aren't I guilty for my own drinking?"

"No. Everyone gets hooked on that substance when they drink enough. It's a question of the characteristics of the beverage, not the individual."

The woman looks at me like at a savior. As a drunk she's gotten used to shortcuts and thinks she may have found one.

"Can I just stop just like that? Isn't it dangerous?"

Again this strange medical doctrine from who knows where, I think quietly. The exaggerated dangers of quitting have been deeply internalized.

“You can. It won’t be easy, but it will be easier today than tomorrow.”

“But what if I get symptoms?”

“You certainly will. Come again if you start to hear voices or see things. Ringing or pink elephants. Come again either way.”

“It really isn’t my fault?” the woman wonders, as if there were something wrong with her chain of reasoning.

And there is. The logic of a drunk seems to be watertight. There are hardships in my life. I drink. My drinking makes it easier to face those hardships. Everyone has hardships, but not everyone drinks. So I am guilty.

If the drunk’s glass were as leaky as this logic, then he wouldn’t become a drunk.

The mechanisms of guilt are deep-seated. Neither doctor, therapist, priest, nor God Almighty himself can uproot them. Guilt is based on actions which can be assigned ethical or moral values. Drinking alcohol, however, is not such an act. Perhaps that is exactly why it is so difficult to give absolution for it. I am consciously avoiding phrases such as “enjoying alcohol” in this context because pleasure and morality have their own special relationship.

The voluntary introduction of alcohol into one’s own system is a purely personal matter without any true ethical dimension. An act alone, divorced from its consequences, is difficult to assign an intrinsic value, say the wise moral philosophers. It would be a good idea to listen to them.

So acts have consequences, on the basis of which they can be evaluated. This also applies to drunken acts. People end up doing all sorts of questionable things under the influence of alcohol. And that’s why we drink it, to weaken our pesky ability to make judgments. Good judgment is often connected with moral questions, but it is only the consequences of a drunken person’s actions which give cause for such reflection.

Through atonement and punishment a person can be freed from guilt. But how do you atone for an act that you aren’t at fault for? Drinking is not an illegal, forbidden, or immoral act. It is just the bringing of ethanol into contact with nerve cell receptors. Nothing more. The logic of a drunk is exactly as seamless as can be expected of a drunk. Because I sometimes commit immoral acts when intoxicated, drinking is also immoral. Clear-headed logic won’t swallow this.

People wrestling with their feelings of guilt and struggling to get away from their alcohol are unnecessarily hard on themselves. Contemplation will not bring them relief.

In fact it increases their risk of drinking. It is difficult to imagine any better relief from feelings of guilt than a stiff drink. And this brings us to the inner workings of the vicious circle: we alleviate the anguish that our feelings of guilt have developed into by drinking. This relief from feelings of guilt adds to those feelings.

In other words: There is just that molecule. It works like this. In me, as in human bodies in general. But why don't others have problems with it? Perhaps they do, perhaps they don't. "Perhaps I had a drink, perhaps I didn't" That is their business. Uninteresting from the recovering person's perspective.

That is why the drunk must break the apparent connection between guilt and ethanol.

The same woman a week later. In one week she has reduced her daily helping of wine from a bottle-and-a-half to half a bottle. She says she is proud of herself. For good reason, I answer, and clap my hands in applause.

Her consumption has decreased by 66 percent in that period. "The government would be in serious trouble if every Finn had done what you did in the last week," I say to the woman.

She laughs; she is already laughing at her over twenty-year-old, bitter trouble. So how has it felt? She has had trouble sleeping, but during the day she has felt more energetic. The woman is still afraid of withdrawal symptoms. If she quits all of a sudden. Someone was taken to the hospital in an ambulance, she has been told.

I say that the risk of serious withdrawal symptoms at this stage is minor. On the other hand, I remind her that she has been suffering daily withdrawal symptoms for years already. For years they have also been the most important reason for her drinking. The only reason, I explain.

"In the afternoon around three, four, or five you have felt thirsty, tired, restless, down, depressed, unable to concentrate, uneasy, useless. The first glass erases all those feelings at once. Those have also been withdrawal symptoms. Because you can have the same feelings for other reasons too, it's easy to misinterpret them.

"Somewhere around the first or second glass, as you start feeling better, you realize the true nature of those feelings. At that moment the only reason for your drinking is crystal clear. Drinking. Not an unhappy childhood, not your father's alcoholism, not failed relationships, not the recession, not Finnish society, not the inhumane environment we live in, not unfair treatment at work..."

At this point the woman interrupts me vigorously:

“I have handled my job flawlessly. I’ve never received any kind of criticism. In fact, I am overqualified for my job.”

I don’t bother to say that that sounds like a typical drunk who manages to hold down a job. Performance fails to match capacity. I say only that I am listing general explanations which people commonly give for their drinking.

“So the fault is mine and mine alone,” the woman concludes, although I remind her that we already talked about this last time.

The fault does not lie in you, although you may suppose so. It is just a characteristic of that drug. You drink because you drink. When the first glass of the day has chased away the previous day’s aftereffects, you have that exact realization. In the blink of an eye the good feeling turns into honesty, which has a tendency soon to be refined down into self-loathing. Thankfully the mechanism for relieving it is within arm’s reach. This is how it works. Today. And on every other day of the week by that name.

from **One More of Something Different**

What do I need from drinking ethanol? Intoxication, that's it. Not wine with a good meal. Not the meandering cognac-inspired conversation in the dead of night. Not relaxation at the end of a long work day. Not self-pity infused lounging in a bar. Not even a little high as I fall in love with myself, my thoughts, my words and deeds. It doesn't work like that anymore, not really, not even passably.

But real intoxication, wiped clean of all self-deception and social illusion—that I really want sometimes. But it won't come back anymore. I want the feeling that anything is possible. Everything that feels important in that blink of an eye when the ethanol molecules tiptoe into the inner sanctums of the nerve cells. My thoughts, my hopes, my desires, my dreams.

The drunken mind yields many fresh-seeming thoughts, strokes of genius, and great emotion. Many are convinced that their creativity would dry up without ethanol. Surprising that my thoughts are still as strange—and ordinary—as before. My impression of my own genius is also as before. Whether or not others recognize that genius is nevertheless unconnected to the amount of ethanol I have consumed. It is of course improbable that others would recognize it at some point, since they haven't done so thus far.

If this reasoning were to arouse anxiety in me, which it certainly would, I could drink a glass or two. The unpleasant contradiction would become easier to bear. Around the third glass my own conclusion would take shape. Others haven't recognized my genius, but the contradiction doesn't bother me anymore. They are simply wrong. I am a genius. If I wanted I could consider, say, my benevolence or beauty. And they too would appear demonstrable.

Years ago I dropped a burning match into a liquor bottle that seemed empty. The bottle yelped "woof" and flashed a quick blue flame. My body can still burn ethanol, but the flame doesn't ignite anymore even when I try. The only thing left is longing. Longing is the pale shadow of extinguished love. Not meaningless. But the only thing to go back to is the longing.

The most tempting reason not to drink is not to be like everyone else. It is dependence on others, someone cries out triumphantly. Even that is better than being dependant on some molecule.

I don't have any idea what my liver values are. Not now or at anytime in the past. My GT, not gin and tonic, but rather gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase, has certainly been high at some point. It could just as easily be that it hasn't. To some other person this kind of concretely demonstrated health risk could be a wake-up call. Changes in GT in relation to alcohol consumption, like other laboratory tests, are individual. For many heavy consumers, normal lab results are like permission to go right on drinking.

I haven't been worried about my liver.

Plato said that working endangers the free man's autarky, i.e. self-sufficiency. In Plato's time, of course, slaves efficiently alleviated this risk. But I have always sensed some sort of danger to my personal autonomy in work. The same distaste for external control is one of the unpleasant properties of alcohol in my opinion. At the same time, of course, this is exactly what we so desperately seek from it.

True hedonism is perhaps the most enticing aspect of sobriety. The pursuit of pleasure can also seem like the most important reason for our alcohol use. It appears innocent enough when we think we are masters of the situation. When that tall frosty beer after work just seems like a way to relax. When an expensive wine just seems to be the crowning jewel to a perfection of gastronomic pleasure. When we actually think that, we are of course enjoying those pleasures. But for true hedonism, pleasure under outside direction is a distasteful phenomenon. It is a danger to autonomy.

At the beginning of the career of every drinker, the impression of unruliness is strong. It functions as a declaration of independence. For a young person intoxication is a rite of passage, an escape without leaving the parents' circle of influence. A long leash. And is that what it is? A whole life on leash. Barking defiantly. Without ever running away or attacking anyone.

The beginning of each and every drinking bout, even the everyday ones, repeats that illusion of lawlessness and marvelous independence.

...

Abstinence is an expression of individualism. This is why the surrounding environment becomes agitated when faced with abstinence, even though directly condemning it is

difficult. As a young person, when most people become acquainted with alcohol, separating oneself from others is especially risky and painful. Youth bears abnormality poorly.

In adult life many aspire to separate themselves from others. The work world has recognized this free personnel resource. It can be called, say, success.

As a young person I didn't want anything so much as to be one more of the same. No wonder that is the most popular drink in bars around the world to this day. Miss! One more of the same!

As an adult the idea of one of something different feels very attractive. The waitress is confused at first when I order that. Then she realizes that I am clearly drunk.
