

Sober Fun Isn't The Nightmare I Imagined

Many of my first hilariously misguided attempts at getting sober were so half-hearted that they were downright depressing. Once, I didn't drink for a whole week, then rewarded myself by heading straight to the liquor store. (I felt like I'd been gone so long that they most certainly wouldn't recognize me. The Russian guy then wordlessly slid a pint of Smirnoff across the counter without me even asking for it.) Later, I went to dinner with my wife and bitterly ordered water instead of beer. I was so goddamn angry. 90% of the fun of going out to dinner was ordering craft beers or getting nice glasses of scotch instead of dessert. I stabbed at my food; I cursed the idea of sobriety. At a wedding reception where I was trying to convince everyone I'd stopped drinking, I conspicuously ordered Diet Coke for show. But every half-hour, I'd race to the opposite side of the banquet center to another bar, where I'd guzzle double scotches, then race back while chewing gum to cover the smell.

It was exhausting.

There was one simple reason I didn't want to get sober; it wouldn't be any fun. I couldn't possibly conceive of a life where drinking wasn't part of it. In any form, alcohol was the star around which my life orbited. It was the one constant in my life. It'd always been there. I tried framing myself against a world without alcohol and I'd instantly seize up. Full-on anxiety. When I was drinking, I had liquor-store hours memorized and I knew where you could legally buy beer first in the morning. Without alcohol, I thought my life would be like a sci-fi movie stripped of all the CGI. You'd see the scaffolding, green screens, and union crew members holding up boom mikes and checking light levels—my sad life. No possibility; no excitement.

It took me forever to realize that the background noise was just that: background filler. I'd grown so accustomed to having explosions and excitement going off in the background all the time, that it'd become my normal. Alcoholic fun was as false and empty as a CGI attack on a metropolitan city. It wasn't real. I'd come to mistake beer and booze as the reason for the good times in my life.

Like any good alcoholic does from time to time—typically, after waking up with a blistering hangover—I wondered what sober people did for fun. I puzzled over what that looked like. Hell, I pitied sober people. There's a famous Dean Martin quote that I used to carry around in my back pocket: "I feel sorry for people who don't drink. When they wake up in the morning, that's as good as they're going to feel all day." Now, several years sober, this is as antiquated an idea to me as Dean Martin is culturally. I mean, that guy was barely even a part of my parents' generation.

My early life was steeped in alcohol but not in the ways you'd expect. My parents weren't alcoholics who couldn't hold down jobs; I wasn't being ferried from town to town to town as we hit one financial disaster after another. No, it was quieter. It touched my life the way coffee stains a napkin. Alcohol splashed my life here and there. It crept in all around the edges. Ahead of family gatherings, the fridge was always stocked with

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glistening green bottles of Heineken and St. Pauli Girl. Wine flowed. It was always there in college and long after. I simply embraced it—it was part of who I was. I was more fun on alcohol. I was quicker, wittier. I also had a more selective memory when I was drinking—I surgically removed all of the apologies I had to make, all of the drunken, I’m-trying-to-show-off-but-really-just-showing-off-that-I’m-a-disaster spectacles I made of myself.

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Sober fun was a curiosity to me. It seemed mythical, like something you could tap into if you reached a state of next-level Tom Cruise focus. To be completely honest, I just thought sober people were lying about how happy and content they said they were. And if they weren’t lying, they were ignorant—they clearly didn’t know what they were missing. I mean, sober people couldn’t possibly be living life. They couldn’t possibly be having fun, gallivanting from one exciting moment to the next—fueled by alcohol—like I was. Theirs struck me as the *Everybody Loves Raymond* version of fun: sitcom-safe, padded-walled nonsense. Nothing could have been more depressing than thinking of what “sober fun” was. What the hell was that? I wasn’t signing up for a life of Monopoly parties. No, to me, sober fun was a punishment. That was a prison sentence for bottoming out way too many times. A permanent “time out.”

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We often surround ourselves with people who have the same definition of “fun” as we do. The people I used to identify with the most were the drinkers. I attracted alcoholics and problem drinkers like one of those neon bug zappers. We spoke the same secret language; we had the same shorthand (“Want to grab a drink?” equaled four hours in a low-lit bar.) Now in recovery, I identify the most with people who don’t drink. I’ve watched and studied them. They’re at peace with themselves. They’re not constantly trying to quiet the noise in their brains or settle the chaos in their hearts.

Deleted: I’m not going to lie: I get nostalgic twinges whenever I see drink-porn on Instagram and Facebook. My eyes are still drawn to coolers at barbecues, wondering what treasures they hold. But it’s residual, like a reflex or a flinch. It’s programmed into me.

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Sober fun isn’t depressing or forced—it’s quite the opposite. It’s genuine. In fact, it’s actually—wait for it, *fun*. For the longest time, I believed “fun” required at least a six-pack of beer or a few bottles of wine to get there. Now, I’m actually present for it and remember it the next morning. It makes me mourn for all that time in the past I won’t get back—all those moments of “fun” that vanished as quickly as they occurred, like rain on a summer sidewalk. Alcoholism is greedy like that. Sometimes I’ll see myself in someone’s photos on Facebook and it takes me a few seconds to process that it’s actually me, that I was actually there. Alcohol has robbed me of many intense, joyful memories, leaving me nothing but whispers and hints of it in the back of my brain. In turn, I’ve since discovered that most of my drinking fun was actually the forced, sitcom version of fun I’d be fearing for so long: fake, staged, for show. And if I’m truly honest with myself, I hadn’t had any real fun as a drinker for years. Most of my drinking was taking place alone in the glow of a computer monitor at 2 a.m. Sobriety has granted me the gift of being here to appreciate what’s happening around me. A night of sober Monopoly may have terrified me years ago, but I’d rather spend a night playing that than the night I got a DUI and desperately wished for a real-life Get Out Of Jail Free card.

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