

Seven Years

It had been a month shy of seven years since I had quit drinking. That was the day I had woke up with a crashing hangover and realized that I had been driving my wife and two young kids around, the night before, seriously impaired. So, I'd quit that day, October 1st, 1979. The day of my daughter's third birthday. And now she was just about to turn ten.

A lot had happened over those past seven years. Finishing the cabin my wife and I had built on thirty-three acres of wooded land in southwest Wisconsin. Having another two other sons, born right there in the cabin. Splitting our family up due mostly to my aversion to monogamy. Having a huge legal battle over primary custody of the three kids, which I lost. Deciding that the battle wasn't over yet. Then going back to finish my Bachelor's degree at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, to put myself in a better position for the next round of custody contention, or at the very least, put myself in a better position to support my kids. Meeting a gorgeous, tall, dark haired, nineteen-year-old college student, Paula, who inexplicably wanted to jump my bones and have a baby with me. Sorry Paula, I had a vasectomy after my third kid. Thank god.

And I did damn well at college redux. After barely scraping by thru high school and getting poor grades for two years at the University of Iowa from 67 thru 69. Owing, in part, to the fact that back then there were a lot more stimulating things for a guy with a raging case of undiagnosed ADD to do, rather than study or go to class.

Being fifteen years older than most of the other students, plus being the father of three young kids, had pushed me to a level of concentration that I had never before experienced. I didn't miss a class, I did all of the homework, I talked to the teachers after class. And it paid off. I was set to graduate with highest honors. Unfortunately, my live-in relationship with Paula had ended along the way. It turned out that her immaturity and my immaturity did not pair well. She had an excuse being only twenty. At age thirty-five, I did not.

All I had left, was to do my semester of student teaching. And the first day of student teaching was scheduled to start the next morning, which was also the first day of the fall semester at Central High where I was assigned.

I was sitting alone in my buddy Don's apartment. He was also a divorced dad in his thirties who had gone back to finish college in order to become a teacher. While waiting for him, I

was having some misgivings about our plans for the evening. There was a great band playing downtown at the Pearl Street Pub and we had agreed to attend. An “old-guys out on the town” sort of thing. We thought we were old even though we were still in our mid-thirties. The misgivings came from the scuttlebutt I had heard regarding my beautiful “ex” girlfriend Paula’s intent to be on hand with her new beau. As the sadder but wiser folks know; there is nothing like seeing your ex with another, to realize how wonderful they “really” are. I’d had that experience before, with other ex-wives and ex-girlfriends, and was not looking forward to repeating it.

As I sat and waited for Don and thought about Paula, my anxiety level started to climb, then climb some more. I found myself drawn to Don’s fridge and opened the door. It was sparsely stocked. But right on top was a six pack of canned Old Milwaukee. Before I quit drinking, “Old Mil” had been about my least favorite beer. I was far from being a beer snob but I hated “the beer that made Milwaukee famous”. More like the beer that made Milwaukee puke! And it wasn’t *my* beer. But desperate times called for desperate measures. I told myself I would just have one to take the edge off. By the time Don arrived I was just polishing off the last of the six-pack. But my anxiety was gone and I was ready to go downtown.

We arrived at the Pearl Street Pub in fine spirits and I continued to guzzle more beer. By the time Paula strolled in with her geeky looking boyfriend (which was probably the exact same way her young friends had thought of me when Paula and I first started dating), I was feeling quite magnanimous. I ventured over, gave them a thousand-watt smile, and introduced myself to a guy whose name turned out to be Garrett. It was all very chummy and the evening proceeded in a blur of music, dancing (not with Paula), and more beer.

The next morning, I woke up on Don's coach with the worst, and only, hangover I had had in seven years. I staggered to the bathroom, combed my hair, and brushed my teeth. I glanced in the mirror and realized my face looked as bad as the rest of me felt. Shit. But I damned well wasn't going to start my student teaching stint off by calling in sick. I put on my pre-selected outfit and started off to Central High where I was supposed to meet my supervising teacher, Mr. Sauer.

As it was the first day of the school year, there was excitement and anticipation in the air. Except right over *my* head there was a queasy cloud. As I became part of the flow of hundreds of hormonally charged adolescents, I was carried along through the doors and up the stairs. I was keeping my eyes on my feet to avoid stumbling and trying not to puke.

My assigned classroom was on the third floor but before I made it to the second floor, I glanced up and saw a very professional and authoritative looking woman standing at the next landing greeting the students ascending the steps. I had not yet met the principal, but I knew that it was a woman and this lady certainly looked the part. I had a brief urge to flee, but I soldiered on.

When I reached the top of the stairs she stepped forward and extended her hand to shake. “Good morning, I am the principal, Barbara Connelly.” My brain was in a fog. I knew enough to reach out and shake her hand but past that I was on unsteady ground, literally and figuratively. I groped for an appropriate response and came up with: “Hi I’m a substitute teacher... er, uh, that’s not right (pause to get my bearings) I’m a *student* teacher”, momentarily proud to have come up with the distinction. With that, I abruptly turned and proceeded up the next set of stairs without giving her my name. I had several interactions with her during the course of the next semester and she was always friendly despite my inauspicious first impression. After that night I went back on the wagon. For a while.