

AurOra Boring ALICE

By Robert Spiegel

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... “Aurora Boring Alice,” by Robert Spiegel, is a chef’s kiss of a story. The pacing, the concept, the humanity, humility, and honesty that exudes throughout is enough to make you sit back and go, “why the fuck can’t I write as well as this?”*

Ricky is an alcoholic. That is the story. How he got there, what he’s doing now, the detesting of AA meetings, will he ever find love again, are all questions that circle around the concept of one man coming to terms with who he is – and whether or not he believes and accepts that simple acknowledgment.

I have read plenty about writers or characters that drink. Under the Volcano, anything by Charles Bukowski, listening to music by Tom Waits, sad realities from Sherman Alexie, Richard Brautigan getting drunk on rot-gut gallons of port and writing he poetic anecdotes, Hemingway before and after the shotgun, Denis Johnson, F. Scott, Vonnegut, the pan galactic gargle blaster in Hitchhiker’s Guide, and Spiegel’s work here is better than, or comparable to, anyone on this list (which includes some of my greatest heroes).

What I mean to say is that this story neither deifies nor denigrates the personal struggles that come with an addiction to alcohol. The main character is neither a piece of shit nor, by any definition, a monk. He is a man that has screwed up and has to work real fucking hard to change the needs of his life that make it worth living.

I write this, literally, while I have a drink next to me, and have my own fair share of ruined moments caused by me drinking and, if I have to be honest, I doubt the last argument I got into drunk will be the last argument that I get into drunk. At no point in time is this story a piece of self-aggrandizing delusion. I think it has been one of the more honest looks at drinking that I have read in my entire life - to the point that I go, “Fuck, Joey, look at yourself with a little more honesty and forgiveness and just try to be less of a dick.”

Spiegel’s “Aurora Boring Alice” is a gem of a story. Read it and laugh, read it and forgive, read it and enjoy, but, most of all, read this damn story.

Five Stars

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language)*...

I told her I didn't want a divorce, but when a woman screws up her courage to decide on divorce, there's no talking her out of it. When she gets to that place, she hates you for getting her there. She holds on to that hate for its wild strength. Not a word you can say, not one word. It's a lousy time to start talking about the kids and time-sharing.

We stood near the edge looking down on Albuquerque a mile below. The lights of the city were like stars, though not as close as the stars in the sky. If I could live under such a beautiful blast of starlight every night, I never would have become such a drinker.

Aurora Boring Alice

You can't see stars in the middle of a city like Albuquerque, especially standing out in front of the Foothills Group on Menaul with all its storefront lights in the parking lot. People are slow to go into the room, and I can't blame them. But some of us got papers that need to be signed.

Same old shit. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. . ."

Melinda's chairing tonight, which helps. She's half interesting, and she doesn't preach this god shit. I don't know if I can do this for six months. I don't know if I can keep living in a city where you can't see the goddamn night sky.

I remember being out on a boat around the San Juan Islands with six friends – relatives mostly – all guys. The stars were so close you could feel them on your skin. For eight days we traveled the islands, throwing anchor at night and hitting the martinis. Pissing off the side of the boat and watching the plankton light up. You could spell your name in pee. Off to the north each night we could see Aurora Borealis light up the sky in green, blue, and purple, and still the stars above burned the sky all night long.

The problem with these rooms is you have to say you're an alcoholic every time you say your name. It's part of the brainwashing. At first, I refused. I just said my name. But at the end of the meetings, guys would come up to me and say, "So, you don't think you're an alcoholic?"

"No, I'm just here because of a DUI. I have to get court papers signed."

Sometimes they'd snicker. Sometimes they'd say, "If you change your mind, we can talk."

I guess they were just trying to be helpful, but it was weird, so I played the good boy and started saying, "I'm Ricky and I'm an alcoholic," when it came my turn. Then they'd leave me alone after the meeting. Sometimes I'd even stand outside and smoke with them. They seemed fairly decent for a bunch of drunks, or former drunks. Yet I couldn't figure out how any of them could live in a place where you can't even see the Big Dipper on a clear night.

The first time I saw mountains was in Banff. I was hitchhiking across Canada, and a couple in a van said I was welcome to stay with them for a couple days if I wanted to hike the mountains. Compared to Michigan, the Canadian Rockies were another planet. The air tasted like early morning sun, and the pines seemed to know me. We sat outside the van after hiking, drinking Boone's Farm, smoking weed, and watching shooting stars all night. The shooting stars never stopped. I wanted to break apart and float off into the sky.

told her I didn't want a divorce, but when a woman screws up her courage to decide on divorce, there's no talking her out of it. When she gets to that place, she hates you for getting her there. She holds on to that hate for its wild strength. Not a word you can say, not one word. It's a lousy time to start talking about the kids and time-sharing. All she wants to talk about is money. She'll tell you how much she needs each month and what day she needs it. The sinking feeling inside takes years to go away. Or get used to. It never goes away. Like her, you turn to anger to manage it. Without anger, all you got is pain.

I stood out in the summer night air in the parking lot after a meeting. There was one star in the sky. Maybe a planet. I fixed on it. I knew I was losing the sky and I really didn't want to lose it. Melinda lit a cigarette. "How are you doing? You doing OK?"

"Why, does it seem like I'm not?"

She smiled. "Well, I have to wonder. I can see you're struggling."

I took a slow breath. It wasn't Melinda's fault that I hated meetings. "I don't know. I don't seem to belong here."

"None of us belong here at first. We're here because we have to be – one way or another. Nobody says, 'Hey, I want to spend the rest of my life going to AA meetings.'"

I gave her a sideways smirk. She smiled and said, "You gotta lighten up."

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When the cop pulled me over, I'd hardly been drinking. I wasn't even drunk. Everything would have been fine, but I was in a pissy mood. He asked if I knew why he pulled me over. I knew why. I was speeding – just a little – and zoomed through the last light, a couple seconds after the red. It's hard to judge lights when you're speeding. I shrugged my I-don't-give-a-shit attitude and he asked me to "step outside of the vehicle."

I really didn't think I'd blow above .08. The reading was 1.2. I didn't even feel high. How can that be?

"We're going downtown," he said. I explained that I was on the way to pick up my kids, but he ignored me. Now my car would get impounded, I'd have to spend a fortune on a DUI attorney, and I'd have to spend the night in the shit-smelling jail.

Fuck!

Scratchy was sharing. Scratchy's an old Navajo with a bad attitude about guys like me who come in on paper. "You guys who gotta get your papers signed," he says. "What a bunch of bullshit. You're just gonna drink again. What the fuck are you doing here?" That's what he says. I don't

want to be here anymore than he wants me here. Fucking asshole. He is funny though as he tells his stories about drinking at a bar that's nearly empty. "It's empty because it's seven in the morning!" Scratchy was one of those sleep-by-the-dumpster drunks. What am I doing here with these assholes? I just blow a couple points high when I'm on my way to get the kids. That kinda ends my chances of seeing my kids anytime soon. What a bunch of bullshit.

For some reason, I could listen when Melinda shared. She talked about how she was swamped with suicide thoughts two years into her sobriety. "If my addiction can't kill me with alcohol, it will try something else." Kinda gives you the shivers. Some of these people are considerably fucked up.

I know what you're thinking. At some point all of this is going to get to me, I'll turn humble, and I'll pick up my recovery. That may work in short stories, but it doesn't work in these rooms. I've seen all kinds of shit not work in these rooms during the months I've been forced to come here five days a week. One guy hanged himself after 14 years of sobriety. Just cause his wife left. I wouldn't give the wife the satisfaction. Another guy couldn't put more than two weeks together. He was even working with my sponsor. He had a live-in girlfriend who drank and kept telling him he wasn't an alcoholic. That's enough to blow anybody's chances. One day when he was drinking with his girlfriend, they needed take-out and they decided he was the least drunk. He went out for food and died in a single-car accident. Shit.

Yeah, you heard right. I ended up getting a sponsor. That was part of what the court wanted. Five meetings a week and one meeting each week with a sponsor. I pretended I was working the steps. He'd ask if I understand the first step. I'd say, yeah, I'm an alcoholic. I'm powerless. I could see the doubt in his eyes, but what could he say. I did that with the first three steps. What could he say when I said, "I got it." That changed, though, when we got to the fourth step and I was supposed to write down my character defects. I told him I'm working on it.

I was standing outside the Foothills smoking and I asked Melinda if she ever dated guys in the program.

She smiled and kicked my foot lightly. “Do you really want to date someone who has more time than you?”

“Does it matter who has more time?”

“It kinda does.” She lit a cigarette and let out a long slow smoky exhale.

“I just asked if you ever dated guys in the program.”

“Sometimes I do. But not always. It’s better if I date someone in the program. They understand the lengths you have to go to.”

“What would you say if I asked you out? Would you say yes?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask and we’ll see.”

Two nights later, Melinda and I drove up to the Crest so we could see some real stars. The stars were so close you could almost touch them. You could certainly taste them. We stood near the edge looking down on Albuquerque a mile below. The lights of the city were like stars, though not as close as the stars in the sky. If I could live under such a beautiful blast of starlight every night, I never would have become such a drinker. I put my arm around Melinda, resting my hand on her shoulder and she leaned into me slightly. She turned her head toward me and I leaned in and kissed her tenderly. She let me, but she didn’t quite kiss back. That’s was just fine. I had all the time in the world.

Sometimes the shares are fucking tiresome: “For all you new guys, and all of you on paper, you may not take this program seriously. Pay attention. This program can save your life. It saved mine and I didn’t even know my life needed saving. I was a selfish motherfucker. I didn’t care about my kids. I didn’t care about my old lady. I didn’t care about my job. And I lost all of it. I came in here because there was nowhere else to go. We’re all trying to save our lives in here. And if you’re not with us, if you’re not trying to pull your life out of the shitter, then maybe you shouldn’t be here. I ended up getting some of my life back. My kids respect me and want to be with me again. I can’t put my marriage back together, but I came to see it was my fuck-ups that

ended it. And that's the whole world. If you can't bring yourself to be part of this program, then don't get in the way. This is real business here. We're not fucking around."

Fuck him. There's always some asshole in these rooms that's got to be a hard ass.

I don't like not drinking. I don't really think I'm an alcoholic. I just drank too much. . . sometimes. Now I can't drink at all. Every day I have to call a number, and every day a recording tells me whether it's a blue or green or yellow or red day. I was green. If it's a green day, I have to come in for a drug test. That's a hassle, but it's not as bad as the guys who have to blow into a breathalyzer just to start their cars. Plus, I don't have to wear an ankle bracelet. One thing I don't know is whether the drug test can detect drinking from the night before. I don't want to chance it. If you come up with a dirty test, it's an immediate three days in jail. I could lose my job, not that I have much of a job.

I was working a job I hated. I didn't hate the job so much as I hated the boss. I was managing an auto shop. The owner had three shops. All day long he went from shop to shop riding the managers to ride the mechanics. I used to come in late all the time before the DUI forced me to quit drinking. I got the work done even if I was late, but he was a hard ass about everything. Just like my ex-wife. Fuck him. Fuck her.

I started to hang out with Melinda. I knew she wasn't going to get involved quickly with someone new to the program – or not really with the program at all. But she was the one bright spot in my life, and I just wanted to be with her. We'd go hiking, we'd go out for coffee after meetings, we'd sometimes rent a movie at her house – she had a house now that she had been

sober for five years. She told me she couldn't get involved, so I didn't make a move. We'd hug when I left. Then I'd just go home and jack off. I loved spending time with her. Just to be in her company did something for me. In my crapped-out life, she was something good. I wasn't going to ruin it by pushing too hard.

I did drink again. I waited nearly a year. I had been off paper for months. I told you this wasn't a recovery success story. Melinda knew it right away. Like the very next day. She called and said, "How are you?" since she wasn't seeing me in the rooms. Of course, I told her I was fine. I thought I was fine. I only had a couple shots and a beer back. I didn't want to get drunk. But she could tell.

"You went out, didn't you."

I'm not a bad guy. Even when I drink, I'm not a bad guy. I make sure I take a nap before I pick up my kids from school – on my Wednesdays – so I won't get a DUI with them in the car. When I did get a DUI, I didn't have the kids with me. On the weekends when I have my kids, I hardly drink at all. Just a little during the day, not enough that if I had to take anyone to the emergency room I wouldn't be able to drive. Mostly I'd wait until they're and bed and then drink. No harm in that.

AA fucked up my drinking. First off, it spoiled my time with Melinda. She knew I'd gone out, so even if I was sober when I spent time with her, just the fact that she knew I'd go home and drink killed the deal. "If I hang out with someone who's drinking, I'm going to drink," she told me. I'd say that's nuts. But she didn't think it was nuts. "I'm an alcoholic," she insisted. "If I spend time with an active drinker, I'm gonna drink. It's as simple as that."

Man, I was going miss her.

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I went out that night and looked at the sky. I could see a small handful of stars. I found the Big Dipper, and I found Orion's belt. Nothing, nothing at all. No smattering of celestial light, no Aurora Boring Alice, just a few lost stars not bright enough to get anyone home. No angels in disguise, no nothing. I was haunted by the stupid knowledge that a short ride up to the Crest could provide a view of caveman stars. The real stars. But it would be useless without Melinda, and there's no Melinda if I drink. That's the stupidest shit of all. Now I know what they mean when they say AA ruins your drinking.

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You can probably guess what eventually happened. I want back into the rooms. Not because I was on paper. But because once I started drinking again, I started making up for lost time. Within a few weeks it was bad as ever. So maybe this fucking story does end up with a happy ending. Or, maybe I'll go out and drink again. You can't tell with a goddamned alcoholic. But I do want to see the stars and I do want to see Melinda, so fuck, here I am saying, "God grant me the fucking serenity . . . "

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote this story to show a common reluctant approach to recovery. Each year courts across the country force alcoholics into recovery rooms. For most, this beats jail. These guys can still fulfill personal responsibilities, and they get a crack at a better life. But man, many of these folks come in angry. Ironically, I leaned toward Charles Bukowski for style. Bukowski knew these guys and was nearly one himself. He certainly understood the leaky boat Ricky lives in.*

AUHTOR BIO: Robert Spiegel is a writer living in Albuquerque. He works as a senior editor for Design News His fiction, poetry, memoir, and drama has been published in such diverse publications as Gargoyle, Fleas on the Dog, Rolling Stone, and True Confessions.