

DO LOOP...

By Paul Smith

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A marginalized man in a state reclamation program uses an errant computer language to turn his life around. We took this submission partly for the story, partly for the voice. Details of setting and character are painted in skid row hues and the voice is 'plain speak'. 'You could hold a corn cob to the side of his head and he'd probably hear Nebraska calling.' An unflinching self-portrait—like he's looking in the mirror while telling it—strengthened by passages of description so arrestingly beautiful they took our breath away. Quote: 'The building was in a strip mall on the outskirts of Lincoln, a dilapidated, half boarded up line of structures, and vacant through lack of interest, money, ideas and everything else I could see fleeing Lincoln because the city was on life support. The strip mall reminded me of Joe the alcoholic, admitting to total strangers he was a slave to alcohol and grateful to the bureaucrats of Lincoln for salvaging his self-esteem. They should have done the same thing for this crummy strip mall. I went home that night, thinking about my interview prospects in Chicago.' And if that isn't enough, every line of dialogue has been nailed down by a hammer.*

DO LOOP

We started out with group therapy, those of us in the program. There were six or seven of us, all in this session because of problems with the State. There was also going to be a visit to Alcoholics Anonymous. Then, the last step was going to be individual counselling by someone licensed by the State of Nebraska. That was the part I looked forward to the least. We had to

complete all three to officially get out of the program. This part wasn't that bad. Everyone here, including me, had the same story, an encounter with one of Nebraska's many police forces that led to an arrest, jail, and now this – the State of Nebraska's attempt to rehabilitate us.

Years ago, when I studied engineering, I was one of the first to learn a computer programming language called FORTRAN. We learned FORTRAN 4, which we were told was a big improvement over FORTRAN 2. Now FORTRAN doesn't even exist anymore. But there was one thing about FORTRAN – the DO LOOP. Our instructor Gary told us that with FORTRAN's punch cards, you could create a logic circuit impossible to get out of called a DO LOOP by giving the computer a command that told it to go to the next step, then another, and then *another*, which was the first step and led to an endless loop like a dog chasing his tail. Of course, this was a big mistake, and we were told to avoid this logic error when using the punch cards. I did like the whole concept of creating a DO LOOP.

Our group therapy session was held in a building near downtown Lincoln. The room was beige. The people, mostly all from Nebraska had been pulled over like I had, driving while intoxicated, or staggering home or something similar. We didn't seem like alcoholics. We seemed pretty ordinary. One guy I remember made the comment, 'I can never say no to my mom.' That struck me as a little odd. He was fortyish, had kids. Not a bad guy. I'd left home, had a lot of jobs and wound up here. I was unemployed.

We talked about how we liked drinking. I talked about the bars I'd been in in Spokane, Washington, my last home, in Rochester, New York, my home before that, and other places.

We got to know each other. Some Mondays I actually looked forward to the meetings. I couldn't drink. Most of us couldn't because we were on Antabuse, a pill Nebraska prescribed to make you sick if you drank. But just talking about our drinking experiences was fun. Afterward I drove home to my rented house on Anaheim Drive. I stared out the kitchen window onto a golf course where my street dead-ended, and just wondered how I got here.

My main thing now was that I didn't have a job. I'd been fired several months ago for stealing from my employer. I did work as a subcontractor for my company's client, fixing up work my company did wrong on another construction job and charging the client. The client showed my bill to my boss, who fired me. Like drinking, this was stupid. Now I was stuck in Nebraska, wanting to get out, not sure what to do or where to go, waiting for another job. I wanted to go back to Chicago, where I grew up, but wanted a job there before I went. I'd been on the road for about eight years. I missed home. I wanted something familiar.

Another thing I remembered from school and home in Chicago was the religion courses they taught at my Jesuit prep school. They talked about 'syllogisms', logical arguments. Our priest, an aging Jesuit said there were always two syllogisms, a main one and a secondary one. Taken together they proved something – the existence of God, the proof of original sin, whatever. He said that every syllogism had to be based on some foundation. He used an analogy, saying that each 'link' of logic would go to another 'link' but that at some point the links had to go somewhere, like to a solid wall or foundation. They couldn't just go to more links. Kind of like a DO LOOP.

My life up to this point just went to more and more links, jobs and traffic tickets, and now I had to satisfy the State of Nebraska I was clean or I would be kept in therapy. I went to the Lincoln courthouse and took an Antabuse pill three times a week under the supervision of a pony-tailed technician who made sure I put the pill in my mouth and then watched me swallow it down with a paper cupful of water from a drinking fountain. He looked to me like an ex-alcoholic himself.

One night I guess I was really down at our Monday meeting. The guy who couldn't say 'no' to his mom promised me a job doing something. So I was happy. He was somehow involved in construction. He said I could start the following week, which would be our last meeting. On the final meeting, he reneged. That really brought me down. The next day I sent out my resume a new, different way. It didn't have my Nebraska address, but had a friend's Chicago address. My previous DO LOOP experience sort of sparked this idea. So the contractor in Chicago I sent it to thought I actually lived in Chicago. My friend forwarded the message. This was in the days before cell phones. A phone was a black rotary dial thing that never left the wall in the kitchen. I kept my fingers crossed. If things worked out I could ditch Nebraska and their police and their counsellors and their Antabuse.

I went to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting they promised us. A guy got up and said, 'Hello, my name's Joe and I am an alcoholic.' Joe was a short pathetic wimpy-looking guy about fifty, who looked like a real-life alcoholic. I couldn't picture myself being him twenty years from now. The building was in a strip mall on the outskirts of Lincoln, a dilapidated, half boarded up line of structures, and vacant through lack of interest, money, ideas and everything else I could see fleeing Lincoln because the city was on life support. The strip mall reminded me of Joe the

alcoholic, admitting to total strangers he was a slave to alcohol and grateful to the bureaucrats of Lincoln for salvaging his self-esteem. They should have done the same thing for this crummy strip mall. I went home that night, thinking about my interview prospects in Chicago.

Next up was the individual interview with the State counsellor, who lived in a farmhouse outside of Lincoln. The counsellor was a smug, comfortable, educated guy who drank tea and sat in a rocking chair while we talked. He sat in front of a window where the Nebraska sun shone over fields of milo and sorghum. He was a dyed-in-the-wool Cornhusker. You could hold a corn cob to the side of his head and he'd probably hear Nebraska calling. I faced him. The sun and the sorghum were in my eyes, nearly blinding me. I smelled pigs somewhere too.

"Why do you like drinking?" he started out.

"It goes in your bloodstream. It makes me feel good."

"It makes you feel good? Does it suppress your inhibitions?"

"I guess so. I feel livelier."

"Do you meet other people through drinking?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I'm really quiet. Other times I feel like socializing and talk to people."

"So drinking is fun!" The counsellor's eyebrows shot up.

"Yeah."

"Hemingway said that 'opening bottles all the time' is what leads to problems."

I corrected him. "Hemingway didn't say 'problems'. 'Drunkard' is the word he used.

Hemingway always thought it was solitary drinking that made drunkards. That's what he meant." I was offended by this hayseed referring to Hemingway. What did this hillrod know about Hemingway? Hemingway was from my neck of the woods-Chicago.

He frowned. "Do you like solitary drinking?"

"I often think about the next bottle when I'm polishing off the one I'm on."

He nodded and asked me to keep talking.

So I told him about a habit of mine called 'making the world old with my eyes'. He wanted to know more about that. "Sometimes I sort of squint my eyes and make the world old and crummy looking. Buildings suddenly became dilapidated and people looked ugly. I saw everything as being run-down and seeing my future in a ruined world. I saw everything spoiled when I drank and now I'm starting to see it when I'm not drinking. Now I think if I have a drink or two the world won't look so bad, so I do that. It doesn't help."

He said he looked forward to discussing this at our next meeting. I didn't, though. He was getting too close to something deep and remote, something I protected, something invisible in group therapy, where I was diluted by the presence of others. I didn't want to sit in the glare of this bumpkin's licensed intellect, sitting in his rocker, judging me for all my mistakes.

The next thing he said floored me. "At our next meeting I want to bring over a friend named Joe to talk with us. You'll like Joe. You have a lot in common. I think you'll find it really helpful."

That did it. I looked forward to never seeing him, his crummy farmhouse and Lincoln, Nebraska again. That went double for Joe. I drove back to the main road on Mr. Counsellor's gravel driveway, leaving behind the milo and sorghum and cornfields and the smell of pigs.

Driving back to Lincoln I thought of the resume I sent to Chicago, thought about syllogisms the Jesuits taught me, and the farmhouse. I started reasoning. If the Jesuits could string syllogisms together and come up with the existence of God, I could use them to predict my future. It went like this:

MAJOR SYLLOGISM: All mortals drink

MINOR SYLLOGISM: All men are mortals

CONCLUSION: I drink, therefore I am

When I got back to Anaheim Drive there was a message from my friend in Chicago. The Chicago contractor called his phone number. I was supposed to call him. So I did.

"Hello," he said. Then there was a silence. "You here in Chicago? The line has some static or something."

"Yeah," I said. "We just have a bad connection."

"Um," he said. "You working? I see you were in Lincoln, Nebraska."

"Not anymore. In Chicago now."

"It says here you're an engineer. Want to come in and talk? We're an old-line Chicago company, been here for years. We need some new blood."

At the word 'old' my eyes began to squint as I looked out my kitchen window onto the golf course where Anaheim Drive dead-ended. I had stared out that window almost a year now at old, crummy Lincoln, Nebraska. The air was still. Nothing stirred.

"Sure," I said. "Anytime."

"Tomorrow, then. You got our address, right?"

I said I did. It was around five hundred miles. I could make it by daybreak, maybe even with enough time to see my 'friend.'

"Sure is a lot of static. Is it windy where you're at?"

"Lincoln? Yeah, it is, very windy."

"Lincoln? Lincoln, Nebraska?"

My tongue stopped dead in its tracks. What had I said? "No, Lincoln Avenue, by New Greentown. Near Lawrence, you know." I guessed the Greek restaurants were still there. I forgot where I was and where I was supposed to be.

"Don't get up there much from Orland Park. See you tomorrow."

We hung up, agreeing to meet tomorrow at ten. I needed some clothes, some gas and some adrenalin for the long night drive.

I needed one more thing, though – a change-of-address card. I already had change-of-address cards from Rochester to Spokane and then Spokane to Lincoln. Now here was my plan. I would get one more, this time forwarding my mail from Lincoln back to Rochester. If anyone from the

State of Nebraska, or anyone I owed money to, came looking for me, they would get trapped in an endless DO LOOP of changed addresses. The letters would get re-circulated ad infinitum from Rochester to Spokane to Lincoln and back to Rochester, etc. If things worked out at my interview I would slip out Nebraska's back door and slip back in again to get my things.

With a song in my heart and a change of clothes in a duffel bag I headed out on Interstate 80 at dusk, flying past the pig farms and fields of alfalfa. I squinted one more time passing through Omaha in the dark, over railroad tracks onto a concrete bridge above the Mississippi and to a maze of on and off ramps in Council Bluffs. Were the Olympic Flame, Psistaria and the Presto still at Lincoln and Lawrence? Maybe if you squinted you could see them. Illinois was now one state closer. Up ahead the road looked dark but clear, my eyes making it look crisp and new and promising.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *DO LOOP was inspired by actual events in my life where I lived in Nebraska, got fired, got pulled over for a DUI, went to rehab. I found so much misery in Nebraska that I decided one way it could never follow me would be to create a DO LOOP of change-of-address cards that would go from Lincoln, Nebraska to Rochester, New York, then to Spokane, Washington and then back to Lincoln. I learned the concept in college studying FORTRAN, an early computer language. There is also some logic I remembered from my Jesuit high school (syllogisms) that I hijacked and put to use to explain my alcohol dependence. This was also a result of my infatuation with the writings of William Burroughs (Naked Lunch, etc.) When I did work again in Chicago, I promised I would never go back to Nebraska. I made no promises about anything regarding alcohol, but have had no more encounters with the law.*

BIO: *Paul Smith is a civil engineer who has worked in the construction racket for many years. He has traveled all over the place and met lots of people. Some have enriched his life. Others made him wish he or they were all dead. He likes writing poetry and fiction. He also likes Newcastle Brown Ale. If you see him, buy him one. His poetry and fiction have been published in Convergence, Packingtown Review, Literary Orphans and other lit mags.*