

Don't gaze at the wine, seeing how red it is, how it sparkles in the cup, how smoothly it goes down. For in the end it bites like a poisonous snake; it stings like a viper. (Proverbs)

It was Christmas day, 2014, and the feeling that I no longer wanted to live was a physical choke-hold and relentless force that tore away at what was left of me in vicious little bites.

Our loud extended family perched in the shade sheltering from the suffocating summer heat that day, telling stories and egging each other on, while baby Galahs wheezed from the gum trees and soft country music played in the background.

Everyone except me nursed a cool beer or wine. These joyful sounds of laughter, children, life and bottle tops steadily chnk-ing was shredding my brain.

I sat among all these people I loved and felt nothing but a brittle, empty, hollow. Like if somebody hugged me too hard I might just shatter into a thousand pieces.

I didn't drink that day. I white-knuckled for ten excruciating hours. Somehow, I also made it through New Years'.

The next hurdle - our also much loved traditional family-and-friends Bush Boxing Day festivities went quite well, until midday.

As the sun rose in the sky; the gathering settled into their respective groups. The paddock was peppered with barefoot kids playing backyard cricket. The bar table was filled with Dads talking about the drought or calling over to the other Dads nearby flipping sausages, clutching beers and laughing heartily across the gap. Mums, Grandmothers, and the youngest kids huddled and clumped under the shade of the trees.

As everybody settled into these groups I found myself once again mentally detaching and shrinking away from the crowd in my own mind.

The peripheral noises grew dim and the voices in my head began to once again scream at me.

You are an outcast. You are pointless.

You do not belong here with these normal, healthy fertile women and their happy families.

Look at your beautiful husband with his nieces and nephews. Look at the pain in his eyes behind that smile. LOOK! That is your doing.

You are worthless. Pointless.

Since being sent from the farm to boarding school at the age of eleven I'd become well-versed and familiar with feeling I didn't belong. I'd carried a hollow displaced feeling in my chest for so long it might as well have been an anvil tethered to my neck. It was nothing new. But that day, at some point, it was too much. It had all become too much.

I stood suddenly and simply made my way through the masses of families and kids, fake-smiling and mumbling inane comments as I passed. I mechanically got in my car and drove thirty minutes back to town.

I detoured via one of our small town's plentiful 'bottle shops' and got myself one of those "don't miss out!" three-for-one wine specials.

The following morning, I came to. The surroundings and sounds confused me. Unfamiliar smells and textures. I lifted my hand and looked, eyebrows furrowed, at the drip in the back of my hand.

Standing above me was a kind-faced woman in a blue uniform. Seeing the sudden onset of wild panic and confusion in my eyes, she touched my arm and spoke calmly: "Shanna you are in the hospital, you're okay."

To my left, in slow focus, came my husband.

Then the pain hit; between my eyes, like a sledgehammer.

What had I done, this time?

Tim had come home to find me at the bottom of a flight of concrete stairs, my face covered in blood. A huge gash between my eyes was bleeding down my cheeks like tears. He had returned early from the Boxing Day fearing the worst once he realised I had slipped away. I'd told nobody I was leaving. Nobody asked. By now, everyone was exhausted by me.

Had I gone back to that empty house I hated with a wish to hurt myself?

Yes.

I wanted to end it. All. And I was certain that this was now the best option for all concerned.

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Later, back in familiar surrounds of home, I lay propped up in bed like an invalid, in screaming pain with the beginning of what would be two black eyes, facial swelling, more stitches, and a horrific hangover. My mental anguish was so acute that I couldn't even begin to formulate what to say.

Tim just held my hand and said nothing for a good, long while. No recriminations. No anger. The deep and profound sadness behind his gentle green eyes was actually so much worse than the anger, the frustration, and the question I could never, ever answer: why?

Eventually he spoke.

"I used to be so frightened of getting a call from the police or ambulance. Of somebody telling me they've found you dead from suicide; or dead in a car wreck..." he trailed off quietly.

Pause.

"I've begun to wonder: is that the only way out for you. I just don't know what else there is."

He stroked my hair as a tear slid down his face.

He smiled at me, so kindly. So gently. And my heart broke.

I gulped and fell completely apart into hiccoughing sobs, then and there. Final, terrified, you-are-going-to-die tears. Somewhere along the way in the mess that had become my life I'd actually lost my ability to cry properly – but that day, I fell apart.

This was, I knew, my rock bottom. There was nowhere left to go but dead.

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The following day I did what I had not yet done. I called for 'help' using a national helpline for Alcoholics Anonymous. I felt by then that there was absolutely no point in visiting yet another GP who would tell me I "appeared to be in good condition" and didn't "look like an alcoholic" while absently offering me anti-depressants or another half-

hearted referral and vague reference to a local community service while mentally filing me under the Too Hard basket.

The person I spoke to representing AA that day sounded positive and assured me cheerfully that help was close. Upon closer inspection he informed me awkwardly the closest contact on file was for a woman almost 300 kilometres away.

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So after calling this total stranger's mobile three times and hanging up before finally gathering the courage to follow through; Tim and I drove that 300 kilometres the following day to meet a volunteer.

I will never forget walking towards that big, ugly building, and thinking: yuck – I do not belong here, either. I felt sick to my stomach with nerves, tension, and the weight of decades of extinguished hope.

I absently took note of a lovely girl and her handsome partner walking towards us and just as quickly dismissed them and continued looking for the 'contact' who said she'd be there. Were they late?

As I was about to turn around, that same lovely, fit, well-dressed, vibrant woman and the handsome, fit, vibrant well-dressed man got closer and politely asked: Shanna?

I looked across to my husband, completely wide-eyed, and he looked back at me with a raised eyebrow as if to say "well there you go!"

We stepped forward to shake the hands of the two people who would be instrumental in showing us what nobody ever had.

These two people were 'recovered alcoholics' themselves (a phrase I didn't even remotely understand at that time) – and what they did was to sit patiently and give us their hearts, stories, and time across a two hour conversation: a no-holds-barred honest account of their totally and infinitely relatable stories.

I'd never had access to such raw, honest, relatable information in my forty years of life as a rural person. They spoke freely with us about what their life was like before booze, what booze did to them, how they stopped, and what life was like now.

I felt a tiny, tiny spark of hope and light enter my soul then and there. Something awakened that I thought had long been extinguished.

After the chat, we were invited to sit in on a group recovery session where about twenty extremely 'regular' people openly shared and discussed their own stories around alcohol. Some were so heartbreaking I dropped my head and silently wept. Some were just there to share a concern and learn what having a problem even meant. Others left me trembling with disbelief ... especially stories of those who had climbed back from the abyss and regained their full health, freedom, sanity, and a happy, sober life. I simply could not comprehend it all.

Eventually, Ally gently asked if I might like to 'share'. I looked at Tim. I inhaled. Paused for a moment. Then I lifted my chin, and stood.

Everybody was fully well aware that I was brand new. They respectfully and quietly sat while I collected my thoughts. Eventually, I spoke the shaky words: "hi, my name is Shanna, and I am an alcoholic."

Tim dropped his head to his chest, and just squeezed my hand as I spoke my story.

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That day a miracle happened for us. After years of denial, declining health, mounting insanity, and impending death I stood and shared the absolute truth from my heart. It was like a torrent of relief, understanding, and willingness replaced the fear and anger. Suddenly, for the first time in my entire tormented adult life, I knew I wasn't alone. I belonged. These people also understood how I felt. These extraordinary, brave, broken souls knew exactly how it was.

And that basic shared connection changed my life.

That day, I stopped fighting and raging against and denying the horror of this all-too-common disease that had me in its death grip and held my entire life to ransom and I squared up to it. It was, I now understand, looking a demon in the eye.

That day, I took ownership of my own awful truth and declared it with my heart and soul – and I consciously left not one single trace of shadow under which I could run to and hide. And in the face of simple truth; like all bullies, that demon lost its hold on me in the moment that I opened that dark, awful, poisonous vault - and let hope and light back in.

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Later that night I felt a strange and unfamiliar peace settle upon me as I crawled tenderly into bed and curled up into my strong, resilient husband. He kissed my battered forehead and reminded me “for better or for worse, sweetheart. We will get there.” I cried. He cried. And a small kernel of hope and light ignited inside us both. We were both utterly exhausted and overwhelmed – but for the first time in living memory, I went to sleep happily and peacefully, and without alcohol, and Tim went to sleep without fear.

That day, four and a half years ago, would also be the last day I thought about and consumed a drop of alcohol.

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Months later when the fog had started to lift and my once-clever mind had cleared and started returning to me; I saw a very clear path upon which I was simply and irrevocably mandated to walk. I knew it with every fibre of my being. I'd never known clarity like it. So it was shocking to me, the power of this revelation.

I knew that when I had earned time, credibility, trust - and felt wholeheartedly ready – that my purpose would be to speak openly, publicly, and candidly - using whatever means possible to be that light of hope for others: others just like me, all across rural and remote Australia, abandoned by distance and a healthcare system that dismissed them so readily. Others who didn't 'look like', 'sound like' or 'present as' an alcoholic; others who had never been fortunate enough to have access to such imperative honesty and truth and life-saving conversations. Others who were slipping away and losing themselves to the most horrific disease and drug Australia worships, promotes, earns tax and profits from and identifies by.

I knew then that I was going to take on the casual alcoholism culture of rural Australia. I was David, and this was my Goliath.

Ends //