



Back to Atkinson Series: When the drink comes calling

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By Ann Dowsett Johnston

Hang out in the brightly lit rooms of AA, or in coffee shops, talking to dozens of women who have given up drinking, and this is the conclusion you come to: for most people, booze is a loan shark, someone they trusted for a while, came to count on, before it turned ugly. Every alcoholic, it seems, learns this the hard way.

And no matter what the circumstances, certain parts of the story are always the same. Here is how the story goes:

At first, alcohol is that elegant figure standing in the corner by the bar, the handsome one in the beautiful black tuxedo. Or maybe he's in black leather and jeans. It doesn't matter. You can't miss him. He's always at the party — and he always gets there first.

Maybe you first saw him in high school. Many do. Others meet him long, long before. He finds his moment, some time when you're wobbly or nervous, excited or scared. You're heading into a big party or a dance. All of a sudden your stomach begins to lurch. You're overdressed, or underdressed; too tall, too short; heartsick or heart-in-your-mouth anxious. Doesn't matter. Booze wastes no time. He sidles up with a quick hit of courage. You grab it. It feels good. It works.

Or maybe you've fallen in love. You're at a wedding, a dinner, a celebration. You want this moment to last. You fear it won't. Just as your doubts begin to get the best of you, booze holds out a glass, a slim stem of liquid swagger, pale blond and bubbly. You take a sip and instantly the room begins to soften. So do you: your toes curl a little, your heart is light. All things are possible. Now, this is a sweetheart deal.

This is how it begins. And for many, this is where it ends. Turning 21 or 25 or 30, some will walk into a crowded room, into weddings or graduations or funerals, and for them, he's no longer there. Totally disappeared. Or perhaps they never saw him in the first place. And he doesn't seek them out. They're not his people.

But you? You come to count on him, this guy in black. And as the years pass, he starts showing up on a daily basis.

In fact, he knows where you live. Need some energy? Need some sleep? Need some nerve? Booze will lend a hand. You start counting on him to get you out of every fix. Overworked, overstressed, overwhelmed? Lonely? Heartsick? Booze is there when you need him most.

And when you don't. Suddenly, you realize booze has moved in. He's in your kitchen. He's in your bedroom. He's at your dinner table, taking up two spaces, crowding out your loved ones. Before you know it, he starts waking you up in the middle of the night, booting you in the gut at a quarter to four. You have friends over and he causes a scene. He starts showing you who's boss. Booze is now calling the shots.

You decide you've had enough. You ask him to leave. He refuses. A deal is a deal, he says. He wants payback and he wants it now. In fact, he wants it all: room and board, all your money, your assets, your family — plus a lot of love on the side. Unconditional love.

You do the only thing you can think to do: you kick him out, change the locks, get an unlisted number. But on Friday night, he sneaks back in, through the side door. You toss him out again. He's back the very next day.

Now, you're scared. This is the toughest thing you've ever dealt with. You decide to try the geographical cure: you quit your job, pull up stakes, relocate to a new city where no one knows you. You'll start afresh. But within days, booze comes calling in the middle of the night. Like all loan sharks, he's one step ahead of you and he means business.

This is addiction.



Ann Dowsett Johnston photographed in Toronto for the 2011 Atkinson series on women and alcohol.

LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

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The series continues. Next up: Teenagers and excessive drinking.