



Detoxing the Perfect Family

Chris Volkman
Toren Volkmann

1

A PERFECT START

FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES JOKED ABOUT OUR FAMILY. How they couldn't stand us: The successful suburban medical family with three “knock-‘em-dead” boys—athletic, smart, charismatic hunks with strong work ethic and sensitivity; my husband with killer abs and two medical specialty degrees; and me, the mom who was a Renaissance woman, an ex-classroom teacher having abandoned the public schools to lead her family to the pinnacle of fulfillment. Yup. Our family did it all: kids turning out for three varsity sports each year, music lessons, community volunteering, snow skiing, the right parties, the right clothes, the right colleges, the right summer jobs, the right family events. Our boys had supportive grandparents and aunts and uncles; dinner together in the family home; household chores, mowing the lawn; and a pet beagle—a true nuclear family myth.

All our golden boys graduated from college, and successfully: the three blond brothers. We could breathe a sigh of relief. We could stick out our chests, sound our horn and proclaim that indeed our way of raising kids was the greatest. We had done it the right way. Mom, forsaking her career and founding a public school art docent volunteer program while running marathons and playing viola in the local symphony, proved that this was the altruistic spirit needed to form a better America; Dr. Dad, coaching soccer and coordinating team sports efforts between on-call jags,

epitomized devotion. Backpacking throughout the Northwest as a family built the boys' character and persistence. They seemed to temper rebelliousness by a perfect balance of good manners and positive intent. For successfully raising children, high school honors societies and college boards of trustees everywhere could look to our family for the manual on "how to do it."



Until that phone call.

It was the call from our 24-year-old son, the youngest. The one telling us he was considering committing himself to a rehab program for alcoholism.

Becoming an alcoholic couldn't have been that simple for our son, especially now that I look back on it. There had been clues about what might happen, *about what was happening*. But until we filled in the scattered, morphed shapes on our paint-by-number child-rearing tableau, until we stepped back, we couldn't see. We were blind to the surreal family we may have in fact created. It was difficult for us to recognize our youngest son among the stricken slashes of color and pattern, and tough to make out his two brothers, camouflaged there as well. Then, identifying *ourselves* took even more scrutiny. Through this painful process I realized that the story of our Perfect Family needs to be told.

The problem of our drink isn't just 'too much to drink.' It is the fact that alcohol addiction happens before our very eyes, under the brazen label of success. We don't recognize it under our noses. That's what is scary. Our son was killing himself in our presence, over several years' time, and we didn't see it. If we are an average family and the statistics about binge drinking in public schools and colleges are true, then there must be more families like us in the United States—in the world. That's why this book.

"When did this happen?" we asked our son. A college graduate for hardly a year at this point, Toren confessed not only to having

4

MY DRINK

by Toren Volkmann

Age 23

A long night of drinking used to make me tired...now it makes me stay up and shake. I'm an alcoholic. I guess drinking like an alcoholic for about eight or nine years was part of the problem. Luckily, it was fun as hell.

Now what? Cocaine? How can I find a new identity when I used to drink mine by the fluid ounce and then turn around and juggle reality?

I thought the problem with being an alcoholic was you just drank a lot. I did that just fine and things were great. No one ever said: "Dude, you're gonna start losing your money, your memory and above all, your longevity and tolerance..." And as if just being shit-faced and happy every night weren't enough, "...when you stop a mean bender you're going to be a fevering, shaky, paranoid halfwit for a day or two who can't think, sleep, even relax or eat until withdrawals are over..." That page of my D.A.R.E book must have been ripped out, right after the one part I do remember that said all the bad kids always had fun and got all the chicks.

I used to be able to handle the worst of hangovers, wear it like a soldier wore a uniform, or drink it

off. I could deal with hellacious sleeplessness from drinking for a day or through the night, maybe ending up in some random bed and still charging through class, ball practice or family happenings like the dark angel that I was...even the torrential blackouts that would be reported or random acts of split personality. My friends and I always gave ourselves alternate drinking names (My name was Poren) as a joke, saying, "So and so did that, not *me*." It was nothing to be ashamed of in 'the glory days.' Things are changing, and what I once thirsted for and sucked on with the finest appreciation, shared with the warmest of friends in the best and most fucked-up times is beginning to scare me.

It's not the urge to drink that I don't have power over—this hasn't been the case (24 pack where are you?). It is more that what was once all benefit and rewards—raging parties, boring conversation turned into passionate arguments, blaring music and endless cigarettes, slurring exchanges of understanding (or even unfaithful or unwarranted kisses)—now presents a rotten side of a Progression from near-sober to out-of-control, leaving a very small margin of error and increasing unpredictability between every drink.



More importantly, there is an equal reaction corresponding to the amount of alcohol consumed in regard to the eventual detox. This is the big problem. During detox, inside the unsettled body, begins a nervous and sometimes nauseous sense...an anxiety and almost a fear like being too alone. You see yourself and everything differently. Like a sudden