

## SIX YOU'RE ALL IN DENIAL

(TOREN)

*What the hell am I doing in rehab? I think I've*

always been a pretty levelheaded guy, but I had a lot coming at me in my first days back from my interrupted venture in South America. Things had certainly changed since the good old days. Being a part of the student body at my university had given me license to party and get as messed up as I wanted—as long as I held up my end of the deal: objective, measurable results (grades) that justified the absurd weekends, the ones that washed all that hearty education right out of my brain.

Who cares? I certainly didn't, and there wasn't anyone else who would intervene, because most of my drinking (scary enough) seemed normal, as long as you remember that any good drunk will surround himself with people who can party like rock stars as well. So what's the problem? I was a great student, from a great family, and I became a damn good volunteer. And don't question my motives in South America, because, by signing up, I wasn't avoiding my drinking, the real world, or the crap-ass job market. I entered the Peace Corps for other reasons.

I've worked hard to paint such a bad-boy image of myself. I wasn't always this way. My decision to go into the Peace Corps stems from visions I'd had since I was young. I'd traveled with my family and experienced the beauty and cultural diversity offered in the world. As a child, I

always dreamt of being a professional athlete, musician, and artist all in one lifetime—and a sensitive, fun-loving, and adventurous person, as well. I never envisioned I'd be the "I Told You So" poster boy for the D.A.R.E. program.

When it came time to start making postcollege plans and decisions, the Peace Corps seemed like a worthy option. Although I realized I'd have to sacrifice countless familiarities, my cultural identity, my passion for the music scene, and everything else that rocked about being young in the good old United States of America, I felt I had a chance to learn another way of living, become a part of something bigger, and to potentially give back to a life that had given me everything. I might have been trying to maintain the course of my childhood dreams, but as a result of my drinking, all that I had ever envisioned hit the skids. Somewhere muddled up in my adolescence, "alcohol" and "ism" intermixed and my disease began to reveal itself.

So how did I land in rehab?

After being assessed by a professional in Washington, D.C., as a result of my desperate honesty (something new for me), I was told that I was an alcoholic and would need to go to an inpatient rehabilitation facility to learn about my disease and how to live with it. Screw that. Give me some therapy and some ways to deal with or control my drinking and put me on a plane back to South America. That's what I thought. With some tears and more negotiation, I figured I'd hold up my end of the deal, and after I was out of rehab and the doctors found out how great I was, how different, they'd just send me back to my wonderful life down in the hinterland. I am an exception, and always have been, right? *Denial.*

My first day in group therapy, I told everyone my story, what brought me to rehab, how I always drank to get drunk, and that I felt that my withdrawal symptoms were getting so bad and unbearable that I'd asked for help. I was okay because I had known something was wrong and sought help of my own accord, right? I wasn't in denial. Besides, I looked around the place and saw all these crazy people with outrageous stories—addicts, lowlives, winos—and I knew that I wasn't like them. I was fine.

This center was full of people in pain, with damaged marriages or devastated families, pending charges and court orders, and all kinds of shame, guilt, and depression. These people were extremely sick.

When I was done and had shared my story, I felt pretty good about my situation and my honesty. We switched to some other people in the group and talked about some of their drinking, destructive habits, and behaviors. It was amazing how their denial completely disallowed them from seeing their own lives and drinking objectively and how their actions drastically affected other people. I thought it was insane. These guys had carted vodka into the office, had drunk on the way home from rehabs and detox centers, had countless DUIs or other offenses, had lost interest in their hobbies, and had destroyed many personal relationships. How could they not know they were alcoholics, that they had lost control, and that they were powerless over their substance? Their defenses were strong and they were in complete denial.

I wasn't in denial because I had asked for help and I came to rehab willingly. My story seemed so much better than most, and so clear to me. Since my blackouts and withdrawals were worsening, I was tired of it. So I figured rehab was necessary for the proper "adjustments." It felt good to finally talk about what had been bothering me for some time and it was easy for me to describe what worried me about my drinking. I didn't have any shame, guilt, or real consequences from my consumption. I drank purely for recreation, and whether I used alcohol to escape or not, well, who cares? The point is, I was doing it with all my good friends and we seemed to be just where we wanted to be.

Socially, alcohol had really seemed like a blessing to me, and the fact that I was in rehab angered me. I may have been able to use some help, but this was lame. I was able to shrug it off as another part of my story, and thought it would be a good learning experience.

"Hi, my name is Toren, and I'm an alcoholic." The first time I'd ever said that was in an AA meeting. I was nineteen and had just finished my freshman year of college. It really meant nothing to me in 1999. I said it with no ownership. I was there only because I was forced to be. I said it

because everyone else said it, but it didn't apply to me at the time (so I thought). In 1999, at the end of my freshman year of college, my loving campus residence director (RD) told me that in order to be able to return to school the following fall, I would have to attend ten AA meetings and learn about the consequences of drinking and evaluate the seriousness of my problem. He told me, "Toren, I think you have a problem with alcohol." What the fuck did he know?

My freshman year had been one big celebration in a bottle, can, pill, pipe, or whatever seemed to fit or make itself available on that given Wednesday, Friday night, Sunday afternoon, or what have you. College life was a great chance to capitalize on everything that I had begun to excel at by the end of high school: having fun and not adhering to the rules or circumstances that applied to everyone else.

My first night in the dorms, before most people arrived, I unpacked and got settled in with blaring music and guzzled down about seven or eight ice beers, like any normal person would do. I was at home. The first time I met my residence assistant (RA), I was drinking beer out of a coffee mug. I mistook him for a regular student and kept drinking in front of him, until I realized who he was. He didn't catch me that time.

Obviously, I hadn't planned to follow the rules from the start . . . definitely not when it came to drinking. Coincidentally, I was put in a dorm with kids that shared my love for partying. In college? No kidding. We had a blast. Put a bunch of inventive college guys together and the outcome is almost a guarantee. I was in a single room and had no one to blame for all the behavioral issues that were to follow.

I lived in a dry part of campus, with all freshmen, but by the way I was drinking you wouldn't have guessed it. I was written up the first week for having alcohol in the dorm. By week four, I had been written up three different times for alcohol violations. I was penalized with fines that could be reduced by donating canned food. To pay my last fine, I came back to campus with two suitcases full of canned soups, vegetables, chili and beans. We joked that the RAs and RDs just sat around and ate it all themselves.

The second time I was caught, I was forced to go to a "second offenders meeting" with a few other kids who had also been caught twice. It was early in the year, so the counselors asked why we were getting caught like we did, and what would help us stay out of trouble. They asked why we drank so much, and wondered if alcohol-free student activities were lacking on campus, as if maybe that was part of the problem. To me, the problem was that I kept getting caught. I decided to ensure that it didn't happen again.

My third offense was a week later, proving all my efforts were in vain. I was the first freshman to have a "third offenders meeting," and attended it alone with only counselors. I no longer thought it was funny. For different reasons, the counselors thought it was pretty serious, too. But screw them all. The rules were too strict. The RAs weren't fair and were going after or picking on certain people. I just had bad luck. I'd be damned if I was going to mellow out—this was college, for God's sake.

With my new buddies, I made frequent trips to a big grocery store and got kicks out of sneaking cheap handles of vodka, forties, tall cans of malt liquor, and glorious half racks of shitty ice beers back into the dorms. Always giddy and excited, we exercised our freedom to celebrate or abuse every chance we got, and that was often. Excessive drinking led to plenty of random acts of chaos, the occasional trash-can fire or petty vandalism, or general insanity. It was all fun and games and no one got hurt. With more and more write-ups on our floor, and empties collecting outside our entryway, ours became a marked building.

The unpredictable fire drills we set off required the whole building to evacuate in the middle of the night. Watching tired and unprepared students file out was icing on the cake. It was a joke to us. I guess no one else enjoyed it on as many levels as we did. The staff surely didn't. Their attempts to control us seemed to make us wilder and more rebellious, and we ate it up. It was an exciting time for a bunch of "serious" students.

Of course, I didn't divulge any real information about my behaviors to the counselors or other residential-life staff. I maintained innocence, and I continued to play the bad-luck card. Even though I had already tal-

lied my third offense, they still wanted to believe me. I was fine. I cited my good grades as proof. It seemed convincing.

As a result of my third offense, I had several meetings with the RAs and RD. My drinking was assessed in a confidential meeting. I met with a counselor one-on-one and was asked about my drinking style and the choices I was making for myself. I suppose this was all part of my intervention process, but I didn't give it a fair chance. For the most part I knew that certain behaviors would indicate risky drinking or problem drinking, so I toned down my answers and shaved the numbers regarding how much and how often when talking about my drinking habits. I wasn't into the whole honesty thing.

The staff on campus wanted me to take a look at my drinking. They said it was serious. All I wanted was for them to lay off me, and for me to be able to do what I wanted. Was that so much to ask?

My grades were outstanding that fall, as were my party achievements. Although crazy and belligerent for the most part, I managed my time well. I played hard, but I studied hard, too. I even made the dean's list. But by spring, my standing on campus had gotten pretty ugly. I couldn't stay out of trouble. I was a victim of unwanted and what I perceived as unfair attention by the campus police. After being relocated away from most of my friends and moved up onto the main campus, I was given fair warning. No more violations or setting foot on the lower portion of campus, or I was out.

Still, I had only bad things to say about all the snooty people on the campus and the nothing-better-to-do Public Safety Team. They patrolled past my door constantly, and, on weekends, even checked the balcony with a spotlight in order to make sure there were no shenanigans happening after hours. I was pretty fed up at this point with all these authority figures on their high horses telling me what to do and singling me out. I wasn't the only minor drinking, on or off campus, and I sure as hell didn't need my hand held during my adjustment to college life—my grades were fine.

I continued to push buttons, bend rules, and enjoy my first year of

college as I pleased. I managed to remain on campus, although barely, the entire year. While my grades began to suffer a bit that spring, I was also working part-time for dining services setting up snacks and drink bars for big-money conferences and helping to cater special events on campus. The occasional complimentary wine was nice and made me less resentful of the weak-ass paychecks. In my last meeting with the RD, we had a serious chat. The cumulative behavior and damage was enough, I guess. He understood in some way that a lot of people have problems adjusting to college and that maybe it would be good for me to reevaluate my motivation for being in school.

My motivation? I was there to have fun, party, meet new people, and, of course, to get that pricey degree—in four years or under.

My parents were paying for my education, not for my exploitation of college life, and it was my job to perform in school in order to stay. I was walking a fine line and my parents were always at the other end with their radar, questions, concerns, and, thankfully, their support and unconditional love. It was tough to satisfy my own expectations, my parents' expectations, and all those people catching my slipups. No one from the college contacted my parents or informed them what I'd been up to.

The RD told me that in order for me to return, there had to be some major changes in my attitude. My current behavior would not be allowed. What he couldn't understand was how I could seem like such a reasonable person during the day, yet get caught twice publicly urinating in the same spot—the second time out of drunken spite. Why was it like dealing with an angel in our face-to-face meetings and like dealing with the devil at night when I was confronted by Public Safety? My answer was simple: those bastards were always following us around, trying to catch or control us, and we just wanted to do what normal college kids are doing everywhere. Therefore, I didn't like Public Safety, and I let them know it at certain times.

Surprisingly, this brilliant answer didn't really cut it. I would not be allowed to live on campus the following year. The RD said it was a shame that sometimes some of the brightest kids with the most potential

seemed to cause the most trouble and find themselves with the most problems. I thought it was a shame that he was a forty-year-old man living in the dorms, babysitting a bunch of college kids and penalizing them for their basic right to have fun. I felt that we students were completely justified in raging and spending our youth and invincibility while we had it. He also told me to go to those AA meetings. What a joker. He didn't know who I was.

This attitude of mine did not crop up overnight. I had always felt indestructible, and reacted pretty sarcastically to the whole notion of being an alcoholic. Even back in high school, I remember being sixteen or seventeen, drinking beers with a couple of friends and mockingly reading through one of those typical self-help pamphlets. We were checking the one or more drinking behaviors that applied to us (in my case, there were many more). If I remember right, exhibiting only a few of those behaviors signified that you were probably an alcoholic. I remember laughing, as we were pounding beers, because one of the questions asked if we ever "drank faster in certain situations or thought that we took bigger than average gulps at times." Our response was, of course, "Hell yeah we do, how else would we do it?" That was the only way we did it. I proudly exhibited pretty much every indicator. But I felt like I was doing most of them intentionally. I drank to get drunk. I thought it was hilarious, and never once considered that someday that kind of drinking might not be a choice. In short, that is how I landed in rehab.

Sometime after my momentous freshman year of college, I bought a cheesy greeting card on a whim because it caught my eye, and sent it to my brother. Along with this last-minute card I probably sent a letter, or some pictures or newspaper clippings. On the front of the card was a big bottle of champagne with celebratory glasses and colorful balloons splashed with confetti going everywhere. Right over the top, in fancy writing, it read "*Congratulations!*" Inside, the card was blank. But what I wrote there typified my attitude and glorification of drunkenness at the time: "*You're a Flaming Alcoholic!*" I thought it was the funniest thing in the world and sent it off to my brother.

*Sure.* My bothers and I took pride in drinking like alcoholics. I guess in some ways, I shouldn't have been so surprised to find myself in rehab, after all.

While I was in treatment, that same brother sent me a letter, doing his best to be supportive and sensitive. It's too bad he didn't include that same card with his letter. It would have been so much more appropriate for me. "*Congratulations! You're a Flaming Alcoholic!*" I wonder if the idea ever crossed his mind.

## NINETEEN NOTHING SOCIAL ABOUT IT

[TOREN]

**On the evening of September 11, 2003, all** Peace Corps Paraguay Volunteers met in Asunción for a conference focused on goal setting and coordinating volunteers with varied skills to work together in cross-sector projects. Many of the newer volunteers from our group, including myself, had invited Paraguayan representatives from their individual communities to join in for two more days of a project design and management workshop. This meant a five-day stretch of extremely helpful idea sharing and a great opportunity to get to know the entire group of volunteers. I was aware that alcohol would be around and wanted to limit my drinking and participate without any craziness. For once, I wanted the results to reflect what I could accomplish when I was sober and that I was able to do things right. I had very good intentions, but, unfortunately, I still hadn't realized that control and drinks didn't belong in the same arena for me.

The first night was fine. I would have chosen not to even drink or had just a few (right . . .), but because it was my birthday, I thought I'd ease up a bit and enjoy myself. For the most part, I drank somewhat normally, by my standards. I went through the whole next day with minimal side effects. But the switch *had* been flipped, and by early that afternoon the deal was pretty much sealed. I'd be drinking again soon. Every time

my sobriety was broken, it seemed easier to keep sliding downhill in social situations. Although it didn't feel exactly like a craving, I knew I wanted to drink. My body wanted it. I chose the easy way. I'd rather drink than walk uphill the hard way to get out of the situation. Avoiding more alcohol, enduring withdrawals, and eventually feeling better no longer worked for me. It was easier to continue drinking than to stop and detox.

I knew that I would drink that next night. And I did. Like the usual progression, I began earlier, I drank a lot more, and I went a lot later. I made two late-night runs to the store for boxes of wine, but it was only because we were having such a great time and I didn't want it to end. I knew that more drinks would keep it going. At least it would for me. Once I was drinking, that's all I wanted. I could have gone on drinking the entire night. At least it felt that way, and my body said I could. Not once did I actually stop and think, *Maybe this is the type of drinking I shouldn't do. This is what always fucks me up. This is what I always dread and am trying to avoid.* No. Instead, all my plans to moderate my drinking or not drink at all were washed away by some tipsy, whimsical desire to keep drinking until the night just faded away and slipped into darkness.

The next morning I woke up in a bed on the other side of the facility in a different sleeping quarter. I had completely blacked out, and a few of us had slept through the morning lectures. Normally I wouldn't care, but I was already fed up with this routine, and that pissed me off. Unpredictable. The night had been a blast all the way to the moment I pulled a disappearing act from my own memory. To remedy the effects, I drank a lot of water. Along with some minor shakes and tremors, I noticed that food was starting to seem pointless and foreign to me. That afternoon, I was able to appear normal and enjoy myself, but still, my thoughts were completely preoccupied with when I could get to the next drink. I may have been present physically, but my mind was already anticipating the ensuing relief of the drinking that seemed inevitable.

At this point, I realized I was at a crossroads. I had two options. I could either fight it and suffer a pretty nauseating withdrawal and eventu-

ally recuperate after tremendous anxiety, discomfort, and another long night or two, or I could continue to drink and put off the problem and act as if everything were normal. My tainted alcoholic mind gave me no choice.

"Yeah, right, you're not putting yourself through that now or tonight." Besides, all the volunteers would be at a bar that night. I was already wet in my mind. My community representative and friend, Lucio, loved to drink. This meant that while he was with us I wouldn't have to withdraw. Nor would I have to conceal my drinking. I could just keep up the momentum and make it through. It was an ugly situation, but I was running out of options. My sense of humor and reason were both by the wayside at this point. I could fight any uneasiness with a few more drinks. In my brilliance, I was avoiding pain and solving the problem. Temporarily.

This third night at the bar I drank slow and steady because I didn't want to black out and lose it all—neither the control nor my memory—like I'd apparently done the night before. What I didn't realize was that my control was already gone when I picked up my first drink. Completely clueless. By the end of the night, I'd maintained a pretty constant buzz and managed to avoid a blackout.

I noticed that as my disease progressed, walking the fine line of maintaining myself between withdrawal, overintoxication, or blacking out for an extended period of time was increasingly difficult and dangerous. I needed X amount of alcoholic drinks in my system to feel normal or a bit better, like most normal people or moderate drinkers feel. But if I got to another plateau a bit further along, I began to let all my guards down, which is common with heavy drinkers. Unfortunately, there is another part to the alcoholic system that told me, "Yes, yes!! This is it. Keep doing this, it's working!" And, somewhere in there, I'd go from a normal buzz to a heavy buzz (and keep drinking while thinking everything was cool) to gone. This is the essence of the brain disorder.

During all of this, I wouldn't remember a thing, but I could be

around for hours more, and often my drinking accelerated. According to some, a real blackout artist can lose days or more at a time. It was a terrible feeling to wake up and have no clue about what I'd missed. Or what I'd done. Attempting to appear like I knew what had happened the night before, I'd have to play detective to figure it out.

When I met my community representative, Lucio, at the bus terminal on the fourth day at noon, I'd already had two beers to take the edge off. After all, I felt good. But inside I realized how ridiculous it was. Basically, for the next two and a half days I struggled to keep my urges to drink at bay. I was at a loss for how to do this. I had completely lost sight of:

- Why I was at the conference;
- What I was supposed to be doing for my community;
- How I had planned *not* to drink;
- What really mattered;
- What I wanted.

All I could think about was drinking when my system got low. I didn't consider it a craving. *It was a physical necessity.* Before my eyes, I had watched my will completely deteriorate over the duration of six days. I had compromised everything for alcohol. It was my new priority. Not only was there *nothing* social about it, but this was the first time that my drinking was completely and directly interfering with my work and what I was trying to do in the real world. Not one other volunteer was drinking with me. I started leaving in the middle of lectures or activities to gather myself, get fresh air, or strategize. It was moment to moment until my avoidance could no longer postpone what I saw as inevitable. My next drink.

About ten blocks away was the same store I'd gone to a few nights before. I understood that two or three drinks would stop the suffering and shut it all off, returning me to feeling normal and functional, the

only things I really wanted. At that point, I didn't care. I had to do what was necessary for me, so I could get past my craving and back to participating in the conference.

I went to the liquor store, disgusted with myself, but at the same time relieved that I could at least end the discomfort. The very anticipation of the first drink was always incredible. Once I had a bottle or can in my hand, had simply given in or decided to drink, I could already feel relief. Before I even tasted it in my mouth or the alcohol reached my system, I felt better. Just knowing that I would get the next drink was reassuring. The discomfort would end. I would feel okay again. And that is what took me to the liquor store.

On the way back from the store, walking through a ritzy neighborhood, I encountered a horse and buggy. I did something I never thought I would: I took a ride in it. I felt bad about this, because all the other volunteers were doing what they were supposed to be doing. Not me. But the ride sure was novel. *¡Viva Paraguay!*

When I returned to the conference I downed my few drinks, even though they tasted like varnish. I attempted to rejoin the normal folks. Very few knew that I had left to get alcohol, much less about my horse-and-buggy adventure. I was pretty good at faking things at this point.

I was completely aware that I had lost the battle and was now one step closer to the stereotypical closet drinker. I had reached a new low. My will was broken. I was hiding drinks and actually ashamed for the first time. I believe I was more scared about what was going on than I'd ever been before, but there was no way in hell I was ready to bring another volunteer into my poisoned world. I chose this sordid path and it was my deal. A drink was always the cure to ignore the problem.

Toward the end of the conference, things got pretty blurry to me. The only thing I know with any reliability is that any time my fuel level was low, I would drink a bit to keep it under control. What finally urged me to go to the medical office at headquarters still baffles me. I don't remember a definitive moment where I said to myself, "This is it. I'm turning you in," or anything like that.

But I do remember one foot in front of the other, up those steps, through the door and sitting down in a chair facing the nurse behind her desk and staring blankly. This same nurse had driven me to the terminal to pick up Lucio three days before, and she had smelled alcohol on me then. Everyone must have known I smelled like alcohol except me. The nurse sensed that I wanted to talk about something, and it took very little for me to open right up.

I was ready. I immediately began to feel relief and comfort, because I could finally talk about what was up and get it out of my swelling head. After my score tallied more points than were possible on a question-and-answer test for alcoholism, it was now just as clear to her as it was to me that I had a problem.

From this point on, all possible procedural steps were taken to get me back to Washington, D.C., ASAP, where I could be properly helped by the best of professionals.

Uh-oh. What had I done? I'm not sure if I knew what was going on, except that I wanted help.

I was given Valium and put in a hotel room to detox in the care of some of my good Peace Corps friends. This detox for me was not my usual. Normally, I bore it all alone, and if people were around, I never told them what I was feeling inside: an almost inexplicable discomfort, which was always there. But this time with Valium, the withdrawal effects were subtle and nearly undetectable.

From the medical office, the nurse called my friends at the hotel and asked them, "Have you ever been around anyone coming off alcohol?" She then explained the seriousness of it, and that they'd have to get rid of all the alcohol in the hotel room, that they should monitor my Valium intake, and that I'd be sweating a lot. Although my friends didn't realize it, they'd been hanging around with me long enough that they definitely had witnessed someone coming off alcohol various times. Only now had it been formally acknowledged. We managed to have a good time in spite of the underlying darkness of what the situation really meant. Beneath the smiles and conversation, there was sadness about what I was going



through. Many said conciliatory things and that they were proud of me, but nobody knew it was really time to say good-bye.

The next afternoon I was driven to my site to pack some items for Washington, D.C., a trip that I figured would last a week or two, tops. Still on my Valium detox plan, with my friends in Asunción three hours away, I absentmindedly threw some CDs together, got my guitar, and pulled out some clothing, which would not be sufficient for the unforeseen fall temperatures at rehab.

As for the trip to Washington, D.C., well, I'm still on it.

Thankfully, before leaving my village in Paraguay, I got to briefly see my two families and my buddy Lucio, who had witnessed some of my struggles and desperation in my final days. I had no idea that I was leaving the place permanently and that those were my final good-byes to the community and all the volunteers. And maybe those were also my good-byes to drinking. Believe it or not, that last one is the hardest to comprehend for a drunk like me.