

# THE DIABOLIC LABYRINTH

My Walk with Schizophrenia



***By Cameron Carr***

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the mental health publisher

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## **Biography of the author**

Cameron Carr was born in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada, in 1960. His early years were spent in Toronto Ontario. Here he excelled in his studies and athletics and was considered a normal and mostly happy child. His family moved to a small town when he was thirteen and life began to go downhill. He lost interest in school and sports, preferring only to spend his time playing music at which he became proficient. By the age of seventeen things were going drastically wrong for Cameron. At eighteen he was diagnosed as having schizophrenia.

After his diagnosis Cameron bounced around a fair bit, hitchhiking and taking buses from one town to another, finding it hard to settle down. He also found compliance with treatment very difficult during the early, post-diagnosis years. Medicines used to treat schizophrenia were different then from what they are today, with more pronounced effects and harsher side effects. This and a lack of acceptance of his diagnosis had Cameron un-medicated and ill for significant periods of time.

Around the age of twenty-seven Cameron finally accepted his sickness for what it was – something that he would have to make peace with. He has since stuck with treatment.

Cameron now works full time in a busy, fast food restaurant as a grill cook and assembler of food. In his spare time he writes, reads, plays music and works on visual art. He resides in Kingston Ontario with his wife Sue and their cat Buzz.

## Chapter One

Where was the 'have-a-penny, leave-a-penny, need-a-penny, take-a-penny' box anyways?

"I'm sorry, everyone pays full price and in case you're curious, no credit."

"I'm not asking for credit, I'll come right back with what I owe you."

"That's a form of credit. If I give you credit..."

"I know, I know."

This was just too much; four cents short and she wouldn't budge. I just wanted to slink out the door with a pack of cigarettes in my shirt pocket, next to my heart. She could have had a laugh watching me try to leave the store unnoticed, a guilty recipient of credit. Instead, I left weed-less and embarrassed. Alone with a keen longing for nicotine I went home to look under the couch cushions for a nickel.

Languor had always pointed the way to the nearest store as my source for tobacco. It was a handy shop that treated me shabbily. I swallowed my pride when I went there as they knew I'd lost my marbles and treated me in a way that was my apparent due. I wondered if she would have forgone the pennies if she thought I was sane.

In Bridgenorth, a town small enough to have only three stores, it's fair to say that everyone knew everyone else's business. It didn't matter what you were doing, buying smokes, booze or just passing the time, you could be victimized, gossip could smoulder long after you'd left wherever you'd been or whoever you'd been with. Rural insulation from the big, bad world could end up costing you your carefully cultivated reputation. A sign at the outskirts could have read: All Who Enter: Relinquish Privacy In Exchange For Bucolic Bliss. The brutality of it all was enough to drive a paranoiac like me to the outer limits of inappropriate behaviour.

I feared going on about the abuse that was directed my way whenever I attempted to buy cigarettes. I knew that idle words once spoken have their own life and can come back to haunt.

But to be refused over four copper coins, an amount that no one would stoop to pick up off the ground? To hell with paranoia, my mind said she'd simply disrespected me.

I always wished she wasn't working, yet I became a piece of well-fried onion whenever I entered the store and saw her ringing up someone's milk or a chocolate bar for some guy whose pimply face made you scratch your head. I'd like to clue him in, but no one listened to me anymore.

The cashier had answered a longstanding question. Did I stand a chance? Would I get close enough to say, "What's that in your eye? Here, let me have a look." She knew I wanted to peek at her soul, to navigate from there until I knew her every move, what every glance or gesture meant. Now I knew what she thought. I was no different to her than others with pining hearts. To her I was the guy who was four cents short. Someone might say, "He's a few bricks short of a full load, or "That one's not playing with a full deck." The blonde-haired girl who deflected my crush while making change could knowingly reply, "He's four cents short of a full pack."

I walked home. Feeling miserable, I took a nickel from my mother's purse while our black cat looked on. I started back to get the cigarettes I needed. The couch hadn't yielded a penny. The way I saw it I had no option to petty thievery.

Why was everyone looking at me? I saw greyish shapes, men and women in the windows of houses, laughing and whispering to one another. A few windows looked empty. I believed the people who lived there were hiding. I didn't know why they avoided being seen but I knew it was spun from pure evil. In a state of alarm, I put my head down and walked on towards a cure for my nicotine fit.

The people who were gazing from their windows breathed, ate, drank fluids and needed sleep. I believed that our kinship ended there. They frightened me and that amused them. I had seen the satisfaction in the eyes of the townsfolk who witnessed me fidgeting, squirming and unable to maintain eye contact. I was wrapped up in fantasy; truth had bummed a ride out of town and I didn't realize it.

Simple things could intimidate me. Someone jingling their car keys, two or three having a conversation out of earshot, someone revving their engine; everything was filled with dark

meaning. The way someone laughed tipped me off to impending danger. The colour of a woman's eyes, dog and car could tell me more about her private life than anyone would believe possible. But I believed. I knew I saw truth and wondered why I'd been given special sight that revealed so much while hurting my head. Life was full of significance. I couldn't focus on what was important as everything was vital. Common things, misinterpreted, would turn my cheeks red hot from shame and make my stomach twist in knots.

Finally I reached the store and purchased a pack of smokes. It was another night in what had become my existence. Life was different and less pleasing than it had been. It was now often a horrifying journey wherein I was missing the paraphernalia needed to fit the mold and be normal. I longed for my lost sense of well-being and belonging. I was becoming distressed; something bad was happening. I remembered when I'd been sane and compared it to the present and it seemed that life had dismissed me.

Hunched down against the side of the store I tried blowing smoke rings in the wind, knowing there was a trick to it. I knew I could do it and kept trying. A feeble attempt to squeal a set of tires stole some of my attention from idle frivolity. I imagined an old man with white knee socks getting out of a blue car.

But no, just when I was getting comfortable there was that beaten up brown Pinto, brimming over with red-eyed locals, higher than they had a right to be, dreaming of giant bags of Cheesies and buckets of Coke to subdue their unquenchable teenage appetites.

I got up and walked away, not being in the mood for their wholesomeness. Someone's words followed me. Spoken behind my back they caught up to me quickly. Talk is all business when its intent is to injure and its target wide open. I heard someone say, "What a freak." Then, he may have said, "Creep". I wasn't sure which was worse.

I filed it away as a putdown, but that's kind. It was a dagger plunging and twisting before I could brace myself. I would have liked to confront those kids but I knew that if I asked them what they'd said they would have lied, claimed they were just saying hello and then ask me how I was.

That I might be hallucinating because of a slowly ripening mental illness was an idea I didn't entertain. Schizophrenia was a word foreign to me. The frosty reality of my situation was that I was considered creepy, a distorted character in a Leave-it-to-Beaver village that was frigid towards anyone different. The cold village stance was too judgmental to consider mental

illness as a possibility in my case. The local gossip painted me as weird. This caused me pain that contaminated everything I tried. Each putdown, real or imagined, hurt; I was crystal, waiting to be broken. On that punishing night I grew fearful and ran, making a beeline for the nearest field where I could sit and smoke cigarettes in peace.

Tobacco, a member in good standing of the nightshade family is toxic, as are many of its relatives. Still, its poison felt good mixing with my blood; I had developed a tolerance early in life. There was nothing like a strong smoke to calm me down.

As I sat and smoked the knowledge that I was half nuts frightened me. I was prey to repetitive thoughts of being on a friendless road that led to complete madness, of being forever and utterly crazy. Crazy is such a cruel, profane utterance.

I was a nervous wreck. Paranoid, anxious, suspicious, depressed – a regular teenager times one hundred. I was going crazy but was smart enough to realize that my time of normalcy was a small puddle quickly drying in the hot sun.

I was also a guy who loved a cashier. I suffered as Goethe's Werther, from unrequited love. The difference between Werther and me is that I lived and he didn't. The torment of love invested with no possibility of return was too much. He took his life. While sitting in the field, I looked inside where it was dark and knew there was no need for heroics. It was just another day. Still, I couldn't believe that there would ever be another blonde-haired cashier.

Though the blonde-haired girl was my answer to Charlie Brown's red-haired girl, I had feelings for others. My interest in the opposite sex was healthy. That seems to bear out the common belief that the male sex drive doesn't rely on logic.

My world was crumbling; I was having a psychotic breakdown complete with everything needed to fail properly - erosion in my ability to think logically, confidence shattered and lying at my feet, confusion and agitation eating me up. Still, I remained convinced that every time I left the house I would hit it off with a hot girl. It never happened. The more disturbed I became the less appealing I was. The girls weren't interested in someone who was unravelling. Who would bring someone home who was entering adulthood on the run from his shadow?

One of my prehistoric ancestors with whom I shared a prominent gene was probably driven from his cave and forced over a cliff for being different and unfruitful. I was aware I could meet the same fate. Metaphorically speaking, I could be pushed to the brink of a precipice. I only asked for the courage to jump before some jerk in a loincloth decided to give me a shove.

Of course, there was school to contend with. What can be said about high school, a world that seemed so immense but was the size of a pinhead in eternity? It taught things we had no use for and things we had no business knowing. Some maintain the only useful thing high school taught them was how to cheat. Nothing I learned there prepared me for mental illness.

I was a kid who was one in a hundred, because schizophrenia strikes one percent of the world's population. What should a well-meaning student do if a one-in-a-hundred is wandering the hallways and showing overt signs of psychosis? If you took your cue from my teachers, you would turn your back and write on a blackboard. Admittedly, I didn't know what to do either - it wasn't on the curriculum. It was the one thing high school could have taught me about that would have been useful. I hadn't even learned to cheat well.

I knew I was in over my head. Sensing the horrid days and ghastly nights ahead, I quaked. Whatever was coming I had a feeling for. It was upwind and its stench warned me to tread carefully. A sense of impending doom and the understanding that my life would never right itself danced around me, two sprites lost in a hypnotic trance. My teachers ignored my budding schizophrenia. My parents weren't sure who the kid pretending to be me was but they didn't like him. In the future, there would be those who would try to convince me I was full of demons. I would wonder what possessed them.

When pseudo-reality visited and I could see through my growing psychosis, the knowledge that I may have a sick mind for good was too much. I would lose control. Sitting on my bed in my parent's house I would rock, cry and hold my head. I didn't have two personalities; schizophrenia isn't like that. My mind was a seesaw though – one minute convinced of the cruel intentions of others, the next questioning my convictions. This type of back and forth thinking was futile and exhausting, but I couldn't shake it.

I did have a friend from school, Joe, who could free me from this private, dull brand of self-abuse. I tormented myself quietly and harshly but I wasn't a slasher, didn't set myself on fire, burn myself with cigarettes, eat glass or swallow cleaning fluids. I was hampered by a marked thought disorder coupled with a persecution complex and this turned me against myself

“There’s nothing sensational in that,” Joe would say, “you’re like Napoleon. He was obsessed, but his fears were less imaginary than yours because he was a prick.”

But the other kids *were* laughing at me and putting me down. I’ll take that with me to the grave. When you’re given the nickname of “lunch bucket”, it all seems real. The humiliation I felt was painful. I’ll never believe the disgrace that clung to me was imaginary.

When I was hanging around with Joe I was a bit in awe. He was accepting. Sometimes I thought he must be simple-minded, but his grades were high. Sitting with him in a field and drinking beer, he’d puzzle me. Sometimes he’d just drink and drink and not say more than two or three words. His quiet acceptance could annoy me. He looked right past the walking hullabaloo I’d become. He must have heard what the others said at school, though if he did, he never let on.

Lounging in a field putting back a few cold ones, the red sky on the horizon calling for darkness to come and shoulder its burden, there were times I saw what he wanted me to – a world without stigma, without one-upmanship. The world seemed to say that if you brought enough people down you could climb the pile and reach your dreams. When all was said and done, I knew that tall and lanky Joe didn’t buy into that and I was grateful.

School finally came to an end. The final day arrived and asked me to quietly leave. I wanted it no other way. I walked through the gymnasium door on that day, leaving behind echoes of squeaking shoes and memories of being forced into square dancing with the girls’ class. I avoided the graduates. My yearbook, unsigned, made a funny noise when it hit the bottom of the garbage can into which it dropped. It had been my third attempt at grade ten. I was fed up. I’d finally made it through, lasting until the bitter end of the school year. All I had to show for it were four credits and a thought disorder.

The other kids my age, the healthy and happy ones who were graduating, were under the impression that the planet was a yo-yo tucked in their back pockets. The world was a ripe peach from a tree growing in the backyard, juicy, sweet, always within reach to nourish and satiate. I heard them everywhere, but I couldn’t look back. It’s been said that if you look back when you leave somewhere unkind you’ll return there. In no time I’d be a small stick on the skyline, hardly moving and then gone.

As I left the institution I choked on resentment. Disappointment fueled the hatred I harboured towards everything. I was conscious of the contrast between my depression and the

happiness on the faces of those passing in bright cars. Office buildings emanating industry and money also struck a foul chord. Intuition whispered: "You're too shattered to ever belong in a company that furnishes both a desk and responsibility." Where was I going to work? I thought that I might not work anywhere. I had no qualifications, not even a high school diploma.

On that June day I saw couples sitting on benches chatting or strolling contentedly in the warm, perfumed air. My envy was so fierce it stunned me. I was convinced that I would never be desirable. It was a small step from there to loathing those who seemed to take the give and take of love for granted. They didn't get it; none of them understood what it was like to have turned into a toad.

## Chapter Two

Sometimes a buzz begins at work and remains there all day. The men get their work done in spite of the buzz and when they leave work it follows. With an envelope that sums up eighty hours of their life they head to the bank, and some, to the tavern. It's the day they've been waiting for. Those who choose to party go all night, eating up booze, good music and strong women. Some were legends, going from Friday until the beer ran out on Sunday. Some of us were pretenders, leaving early and losing our suppers in the ditch.

Yes, *I* had a job. *I* worked with the legends. *I* was one who heaved in the ditch. I wouldn't often party with the legends or the women they ran with but I had money; biweekly, I had a bit of cash to play with. I remembered the girls who had turned up their noses at me. I dreamed that if they knew how I was putting in my time one of them might come to my level to take in the view. It didn't happen but it was still a wonder to me that within a week of having decided work was a no go, I was labouring for dollars.

It seemed a good while since school's melodramatic end, its pinch of promises to stay in touch and cup or two of overdone tears. Boohoo. *My* life would never be the same. For what it was worth, all signs seemed to point to there being life ahead.

I had a job. I didn't possess or need any memories of the prom. Life had dealt me a measure of contentment. I kept an eye on myself, making a mental note to guard against becoming too smug. If I was inching close to that place where one is puffed up past the point that the world finds acceptable, I would pull back. If you stand on a pedestal admiring the view someone may be tempted to give you a nudge. I knew all about falls from grace and needed no reminders.

I was working where my father worked. He was white collar, while I was blue. I wore blue coveralls, and a blue hard-hat. Sometimes a blue mood graced my sleeve alongside my blue heart. I was oozing blue.

I was treated like anybody else at work. Nobody held my father's white coat against me. Nobody knew that if there were trouble at work Dad would likely conclude that the fault lay with me. Nobody knew that and nobody needed to.

During this time of hard labour and, eventually, of disillusionment, I'd spend my evenings walking through the sweet smelling fields with a six-pack and hand rolled cigarettes. Now and then I was with Joe, but usually I was alone. I really wished that my thoughts would be pleasant as I roamed, but they were intent on misbehaving.

My brain could convince itself that people were hiding in the grass, quietly watching me. Sometimes I thought those hiding were men and women that had some control over me.

Sometimes the air attained form. The long green and yellow grass would bend into patterns and hiss. My heart would pick up speed and I'd walk, hurried footsteps making haste. Did I see someone? Did they follow me with their dull gaze? If they ever confronted me would my instinct for self-preservation rule or was flight my only option?

Many nights I saw them, or traces of them. They were a wicked, miserable force. Pathetic outlines resembling women and men, beings without substance. Sometimes I would run hard when I sensed them, half-laughing, breathing heavily while I crashed through the waist high grass and weeds, climbed fences, and sprinted until I could go no farther. By the time I was tired out the spirits would be gone. Sitting very still I'd relish the ale that soothed me.

It was becoming obvious that Joe wished to end our friendship. I may have had some thinking problems, but I wasn't completely thick. I cut him out of my life, avoiding him at every turn. I made excuses for not being able to hang around with him when he did call. I was rude. Eventually the phone always rang for someone else and I attained the status of non-existence. I can't say why I thought he was tiring of our friendship. Maybe it was something said, or possibly, a misread gesture. Maybe I felt unworthy.

So I was working by day and running around alone in circles at night. The hallucinations weren't much company, looking ridiculous as they strove for invisibility. They couldn't cheer you up, but they could scare you.

Darkness would see me home after an evening in the fields. Muttering a greeting to my parents, I would go to bed and curse ill will into my pillow. As tears of humiliation dried I would find my way into splintered sleep that felt better than being awake. The next day I would work again.

Time passed and little changed. People complained about the weather and sat in front of fans. Children ran through sprinklers, shrieking and getting soaked. Every weekend had its share of weddings, the newlyweds brash in their expectations.

Gradually I reached the conclusion that I was too young for self-imposed solitude. My belief that isolation was character building seemed wrong. After all, I'd been social until recently. The day I would leave the mess my life had become limped towards me. I decided to go west.

As I waited for the driver to inspect my ticket, I looked over my shoulder at the psychological baggage following me. Memories, regrets, disappointments were lined up to wish me a faux farewell. I was travelling to Edmonton, hoping to find some sense along the way.

We left the terminus and I made myself feel nothing. I rode along with the others, with whom of necessity and barring rest stops I was trapped, a bug in a spider's web. For hours I watched the miles pass at a surprising clip. As we sped into the future I thought of work and the men I had laboured with. They had seemed to understand me.

What I'd saved from working was financing my flight from the specters in the field and the derision of other kids. It had bought me a seat on a Greyhound bus. Work was allowing me

temporary freedom, a fragile distraction filled with daydreams. I would eventually discover the cliché to be true: you can run but you can't hide from who you are.

As the trip wound on I got used to it. I slept as much as possible, smoked a lot of cigarettes and enjoyed sloppy meals at rest stops. The odd conversation was struck up with other travelers. We could discuss things that we would usually keep to ourselves because we knew we wouldn't see one another again. To one woman I confided that I that I was escaping from trouble, though I did not go into detail. She was very sympathetic and I was attracted to her but nothing came of it. I don't know what I expected possibly could.

We hit the prairies while I was asleep. When I woke there was nothing but flat land for miles. I felt liberated in a way I hadn't for some time. I felt free, no longer a bug in a web. The feeling lasted until we hit Winnipeg where we endured a four hour layover. This killed the elation of the moment, though I knew I wouldn't forget it. From Winnipeg the trip turned into a marathon, uneventful and boring.

Finally, the ordeal ended. As I entered the restaurant in the depot in Edmonton, the clock had just snuck past 5:30 in the morning.

"Coffee?"

I nodded and was served one almost before I had time to sit down.

"Menu?"

I shook my head and she assumed a frown. Had I been short with her? How can you be short with anyone who speaks to you in one word sentences?

When I finished my coffee I went outside into the brisk air and found myself energized. I sat my suitcase on a bench and walked back and forth, hands clasped behind my back, growing excited now that my fresh start had arrived.

Eventually my enthusiasm waned as I began to question my judgment. I was eighteen, lonely, cold and many hundreds of miles from home. To be unsure in those circumstances could be expected from any teen, regular or otherwise, but was it normal to be cowed by the ill

will that seemed to be devilishly playing itself out wherever I looked? Was I delusional? Hallucinating?

After sitting on a bench and going over all the ways in which I could fail, I put my belongings in the trunk of a taxi and slid into the immaculate interior. The air felt colder than it had earlier and I asked the driver for a bit of heat. He obliged and tried to engage me in conversation. I felt a lack of clarity and repelled him with silence. I couldn't have talked if I'd wanted to. The closer I sensed we were to my brother's apartment the more anxious I became. How was I going to explain myself?

When we arrived at my destination I retrieved my bag and thanked the driver. He looked at me indifferently and sped away. In spite of my dread, I found myself hoping my brother was home and that he had some type of comfort food in his cupboard, something he and I had grown up on.

"It could be a hell of a lot worse," my brother informed me, as I looked at the uninhabited space inside his cupboard.

We'd exhausted the formalities, the slapping of backs, shaking of hands.

"It's great to see you,"

"You're looking really good,"

"You think so?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"Look in the fridge," he said, "there should be a few beers in there. It's pretty much help yourself around here, bro. I have to get dressed for work. Got bills to pay, know what I mean?"

I heard someone talking in his sleep and raised my eyebrows.

"Oh that's Frank. He sleeps through anything and doesn't talk much. If he's not up by eight, wake him, okay?"

"Sure, Bob, no problem."

"Okay, I have to get ready. Grab a beer and make yourself at home."

When my brother was leaving for work I spoke, between swigs of beer, “I can help with the bills. I saved some this summer. It’s just sitting in the bank getting mouldy.”

“Alright,” he answered, grinning and winking, “you can buy the beer tonight. See you around five.”

“Bob? Hey Bob,” I said, but he was gone.

I walked past the lump on the floor that was Frank and looked out the window at the cars in the parking lot and the other apartment buildings that looked, but for variance in colour, a lot like the one I found myself in. All of them three stories high, without elevators I guessed, and made of brick. Some were endowed with balconies and others weren’t. Momentarily, the sun came out from behind slow moving clouds, and then it hid.

I lay on the couch. I was dog-tired, but I knew I had to keep an eye out for Bob’s roommate. I kept pulling myself from tipping over into slumber, back to red-eyed consciousness, over and over until I didn’t care and I slept.

I spent the day snoozing complacently enough for one who’d let his brother’s roommate down before being introduced to him. Adrift in a sea of vivid dreams and colourful visions I was cleansed of a lot of fear. Many misperceptions that had jumped from the highway to roost in my head left, as I contentedly snored. Who could understand how I feel right now, I asked myself during a time of half wakefulness.

When I came to I didn’t know where I was and then it hit me; I was at Bob’s in Edmonton. There was something I was supposed to do, but I couldn’t remember what it was. After shaking my head so the cobwebs flew, I went over everything that I had done since arriving and still couldn’t remember. Maybe there wasn’t anything after all. I decided to try to relax and went into the kitchen to find something to eat. When I looked into the empty cupboards I remembered my assignment: GET BEER.

Thinking about trying to find the beer store tired me out. After finding it I would have to buy the beer and cart it all the way home. What if I got lost? Without looking I told myself I probably didn’t have enough money anyways. A voice in my head suggested going to the bank and I told the voice to shut up. I lay down again, to sleep, to spend just a little more time where perhaps humankind’s first narcotic, slumber, could weave some magic and, in the bargain, make me part of its tapestry.

## Chapter Three

I heard Bob and Frank come in and the fridge being filled with beer. I felt like they had been with me all day and we'd been drinking and swapping stories. I smiled sleepily.

"Hey, stranger."

Stranger than you know Bob, I thought. Someone opened the curtains and the sun hurt my eyes. Fantasies of beer commercial camaraderie fled when my legs were twisted and I was flipped over onto my stomach.

"It's wedgie time," Bob said.

"Hey," I started squirming and foolishly, to panic, "hey!"

"Relax. We're not interested in your crusty underwear. Well, I can only speak for myself, of course."

Bob's roommate didn't speak though I had the impression that he could care less if it was crusty, ripped, too small or threadbare. I grabbed a beer then returned to where I'd been laying, the sad couch that looked as if it was determined to unravel until all that was left of it were a few unremarkable threads. Bob put a Dylan record on. We clinked our bottles together and drank.

After drinking for a while I noticed that my brother seemed different. He wasn't the person I remembered. He was the same visually. I knew him even with the mop of hair he'd been without at home, but he had changed.

"There's something different about you," I blurted.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes ...not that that's a bad thing, it's just..."

"I don't have a clue as to what you're going on about," he replied, "do you think I'm some kind of demon or a guy off a U.F.O. or something?"

"I'm just having a bad trip," I answered quietly, feeling cowed, "just a bad trip."

"Yeah," he said, the beer giving him bitter eyes, "well, you don't expect me to tip-toe around and watch everything I do or say, do you?" I knew he was referring to my state of mind and answered in the negative.

"Well, drink up," he said, "maybe we'll go out later."

I woke in the morning not knowing or caring if we'd gone out. Something, besides my pounding head and shaking hands was wrong. Ah, open up hungry earth and swallow me feet first with my black boots on. What am I going to do, I moaned, how can I possibly explain that I've pissed myself in the night? I was soaked. I'd lost control over my bladder.

Quietly, I ran and jumped in the shower fully clothed, enduring the hot spray long enough to get sopping wet. Towel in hand I went back where my disgrace lived in the fibers and fluff that made up the couch. The wetness was just waiting to be found. I'd really degraded myself this time.

After drying my hair I arranged the sleeping bag I'd been loaned, driest side facing the sky. I wanted to shake my fist at that sky; I wanted to shout at God and thank him for nothing. But, I didn't. I went to the fridge grabbed a beer and chugged. When it was gone I chugged another.

"Hey," Bob said, amused, "go easy, the bar doesn't open for awhile."

"Hair of the dog," I replied. He nodded. I went out and joined him on the couch.

"You puke?"

"No Bob, I didn't puke."

"Hmmm, something stinks. Maybe it's you sitting there in your wet clothes." He shrugged his shoulders and walked back to his room.

Bob and I had drunk our share of alcohol together. It was a greeting, a farewell, a ritual, a ceremony that treads water in a hallowed lake. When we drank by day the sky seemed brighter, a hallucination that kept me parched. At night the darkness was complete, it was

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