I drank. I drank Fumé Blanc at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and I drank double shots of Johnnie Walker Black on the rocks at a dingy Chinese restaurant across the street from my office, and I drank at home. For a long time, I drank expensive red wine, and I learned to appreciate the subtle differences between a silky Merlot and a tart Cabernet Sauvignon and a soft, earthy Beaucastel from the south of France, but I never really cared about those nuances because, honestly, they were beside the point. …

I drank when I was happy and I drank when I was anxious and I drank when I was bored and I drank when I was depressed, which was often. I started to raid my parents’ liquor cabinet the year my father was dying. He’d be in the back of their house in Cambridge, lying the hospital bed in their bedroom, and I’d steal into the front hall bathroom and pull out a bottle of Old Grand-Dad that I’d hidden behind the toilet. It tasted vile – the bottle must have been fifteen years old – but my father was dying, dying very slowly and gradually from a brain tumor, so I drank it anyway and it helped.

A love story. Yes: this is a love story. It’s about passion, sensual pleasure, deep pulls, lust, fears, yearning hungers. It’s about needs so strong they’re crippling. It’s about saying goodbye to something you can’t fathom living without.

I loved the way drink made me feel, and I loved its special power of deflection, its ability to shift my focus away from my own awareness of self and onto something else, something less painful than my own feeling. I loved the sounds of drink: the slide of a cork as it eased out of a wine bottle, the distinct glug-glug of booze pouring into a glass, the clatter of ice cubes in a tumbler. I loved the rituals, the camaraderie of drinking with others, the warming, melting feeling of ease and courage it gave me……

Still, I look in the mirror sometimes and think, What happened? I have the CV of a model citizen or a gifted child, not a common drunk. Hometown: Cambridge, Massachusetts, backyard of Harvard University. Education: Brown University, class of ’81, magna cum laude. Parents: esteemed psychoanalyst (dad) and artists (mom), both devoted and insightful and keenly intelligent.

In other words, nice person, from a good, upper-middle-class family. I look and think, What happened?

Of course, there is no simple answer. Trying to describe the process of becoming an alcoholic is like trying to describe air. It’s too big and mysterious and pervasive to be defined. Alcohol is everywhere in your life, omnipresent, and you’re both aware and unaware of it almost all the time, all you know is you’d die without it, and there is no simple reason why this happens, no single moment, no physiological event that pushes a heavy drinker across a concrete line into alcoholism. It’s a slow, gradual, insidious, elusive becoming.

Beneath my own witty, professional façade were oceans of fear, whole rivers of self-doubt. I once heard alcoholism described in an AA meeting, with eminent simplicity, as ‘fear of life’, and that seemed to sum up the condition quite nicely. I, for example, had spent half my professional life as a reporter who lived in secret terror of the most basic aspects of the job, of picking up the phone and calling up strangers to ask questions. Inside, I harbored a long list of qualities that made my own skin crawl: a basic fragility; a felling of some piece of my soul might crumble if you looked me the wrong way; a sense of being essentially inferior and unprotected and scared.

The need is more than merely physical; It’s psychic and visceral and multilayered. There’s a dark fear to the feeling of wanting that wine, that vodka, that bourbon; a hungry, abiding fear of being without, being exposed, without your armor. In meetings you often hear people say that, by definition, an addict is someone who seeks physical solutions to emotional or spiritual problems. Is suppose that’s an intellectual way of describing that brand of fear, and the instinctive response that accompanies it; there’s a sense of deep need, and the response is a grabbiness, a compulsion to latch on to something outside yourself in order to assuage some deep discomfort.

You drink long and hard enough and your life gets messy. Your relationships (with nondrinkers, with yourself) become strained. Your work suffers. You run into financial trouble, or legal trouble, or trouble with the police. Rack up enough pain and the old math – Discomfort + Drink = No Discomfort – ceases to suffice; feeling ‘comfortable’ isn’t good enough anymore. You’re after something deeper than a respite from shyness, or a break from private fears and anger. So after a while, you alter the equation, make it stronger and more complete. Pain + Drink = Self-Obliteration.