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The Mind of an Alcoholic

Payton Gillis

“The cops are coming!” someone yelled. We quickly turned off the music and the lights in my friend Kelsie’s house.

Aggressive shushes and worrisome “oh no’s” of my high school classmates filled every room. Most of the two hundred people crammed into the house huddled or crouched down to the floor. Except for me. I had a different plan than to sit and wait for my Minor in Possession to be handed to me.

The first thing that came to my head was: *Run.*

My egocentric, irrational, and completely plastered self thought my future was over.

So, I did just that. I ran, thinking it would make everything better.

I weaved through the people kneeling on the white tile floor and finally made it to the back door that sat partially open and lopsided. I glanced up along its left side to see its upper hinge dismantled...*probably by some drunken idiot.* It creaked as I quickly pushed it open, just enough for my body to squeeze through. I stumbled into Kelsie’s unfenced backyard, and the door wobbled back to where it had rested prior to my arrival.

I began my journey. My thoughts started to race as fast as I wanted my feet to. *This can’t be happening. Where am I going? Where did Kelsie say the pathway in her backyard was? I can’t see it. All I see is blackberry bushes. It’s fine, just go. Go as far as you can away from this stupid house.* The only thing I was certain of in that moment: I had to fix the mess I was in.

I sprinted straight into the sticker bushes. I didn’t think about how much it would hurt, or the consequences that might come from my decisions. The thorns and vines tugged on my clothes, trying to reel me back. But I couldn’t turn around; I was

already in too deep. I stumbled in deeper. Further and further away from *home*. My whole body: numb.

That morning, I woke in a pile of sticker bushes. A hot ray of sun pierced through my dry eyes to the back of my numb skull.

Trapped in my own mess.

This was the closest I'd ever come to understanding my grandfather and father's alcoholism.

Harvesting an addiction is easy, you just have to have the capability to run. Away from life. Away from all your problems. An addiction is something that seems so great in the moment, like a little break from reality. Euphoria.

Addiction is what often looks to be the perfect berry on a sticker bush. But once it's plopped in the mouth of its picker and swirled around his or her tongue, there's a different outcome than expected. An unripe berry. There's nothing worse than a berry that was taken too soon. They're hard to swallow.

My grandfather was that berry picked too soon.

His death, hard to swallow.

I never saw him drunk... or so I thought. I only knew him for his laughter, the crackling chuckle in his voice. The way his black eyes squinted and rosy cheeks lifted as his throat let out a burst of light that could brighten a room. He was always a jokerster who never took life too seriously. He would make puns out of anything he could, down to his goodbyes—"See you later alligator." Every time I saw my grandfather, he left my cheeks sore from smiling. *He couldn't hurt a fly*, my clueless self thought as he tickled me to death. Apparently he wasn't always the man I knew. My grandfather's alter ego lived on through the stories of my family members.

Two years before my grandfather's death was the first time my grandmother let me have a glimpse into the history of his alcoholism. "It only took him twenty years of dealing with two DUIs, punching holes into walls, and roughly a dozen 911 calls for him to finally call it quits. Just in time too, almost took the kids and left his sorry ass... You see this fake tooth? The bastard punched it out, the kids saw the whole thing. Blood everywhere."

Sadly, my grandmother, my father, my aunt, and I were all blind. Blind to the lie we so desperately wanted to believe in: his sobriety. The quits we had prayed for a decade ago weren't the ones we received. Little did we know, the rage was the only thing that stopped. He repressed it into the pit of his soul. The drinking continued. His alcoholism went from scary to silent, which in the end was even harder to grasp. He tried with all his might to hide it from everyone and did a damn good job of it for ten years.

He accepted his decade long token of sobriety just shy of his date of death. April 15th, 2015. My grandfather devoured a half gallon of booze then drowned in a hot tub. The only thing he left behind was an empty plastic bottle of McCormick's vodka, floating over his sunken body—his suicide note.

The worst part of the morning after my horrendous and blurred night was waking up to no one but the glaring sun. As my eyes squinted open my stomach contracted. My clenched hand moved closer to my bloated belly... *ouch*. My stomach tightened more intensely with every passing second. *Oh no*. I moved my knees up to my chest and turned onto my side. *This is bad*. My dry mouth began swallowing even though there was nothing to swallow. The uncontrollable clenching of my throat made it hard to breathe. *Come on, just do it!* I felt the warmth reach from the pit of my stomach up to my chest and to the back of my throat. I could taste it. *Here it comes*. My eyes squinted and

my body jolted forward as I let out a cloudy white liquid; it splashed onto the dark purple vines of the blackberry bushes, seething down to the layer underneath. Tears ran down the side of my cheek as I dry heaved. *Stop... there's no more. Stop.* I finally gasped for air. Relieved that my stomach no longer held the toxins I had consumed the night before, I lay there with my eyes closed.

Afraid any movement would set my stomach off again, I remained there and didn't move an inch. The stench of puke sat in my nose. Its putrid taste festered between the crevices of my teeth.

However, that became very unapparent to me once I noticed I was alone.

Like humans, blackberries repopulate. Their seeds carry the DNA in order for their offspring to have the same traits and attributes. As far as I know, my grandfather was the first of my family that successfully planted and grew this atrocious blackberry bush—alcoholism. After my grandmother became unexpectedly pregnant with her second child—my father, Shannon—my grandfather's bush grew like it would die tomorrow. It engulfed anything in its path: dishes, chairs, walls, and hearts. Everything it touched lay shattered in its suffocating vines. My grandfather ended up laying the perfect soil for my father's seed to sprout. My father, like me, was born with a susceptibility to addiction.

However, he let his get the best of him.

My father didn't fall far from my grandfather's blackberry bush. His anger, tangents, and screaming were all something I recognized from my grandmother's stories. The way my father fearlessly gulped the lurid poison was, in a sense, the way a sword swallower performed the plunging of a sword down his or her throat. Bravely, and with no hesitation. His Cherokee

Indian hands lifted a full glass of booze up to his lips every night. By the time nine o'clock crawled around, I began reliving my father's life through his adolescent eyes. He was the man he once hated, and I was him: the ten-year-old locking himself in his room, hiding under a blanket curled up in a ball on his twin-sized bed. I'm not sure about him at that age, but all I could possibly think as this familiar monster beat my pink-painted door black was:

Don't let my seed fall too close to his.

I slowly lifted my head. My hands and forearms pressed against the sharp blades of the thorns that slowly, yet firmly, pierced my discolored skin. The vines of the blackberry bush spun and intertwined like barbwire. Its blades snapped under me with the adjustment of my weight. I looked down at my legs that were completely covered in blood. It became apparent to me: I made a big mistake. My weak arms gave out from under me and I fell backwards in disbelief. *There's no fixing these wounds; what's done is done.*

Even with the alcohol still pulsing through my veins, I hurt everywhere. I lay there for a few moments, looking up at the clear blue sky, and asked: *How am I going to get myself out of this mess?* Every minute that passed I could feel reality setting in. The agonizing pain shot through my body with each minute, increasing in intensity as my liver broke down the alcohol. It finally hit me what I had to do: *Walk. Slowly. Try not to get more tangled in my own mess. I'm five feet away from where the grass meets the bushes.*

I stopped thinking and started doing.

I got myself up.

I made it back to where I was:
where life meets addiction.

I know the consequences of this liquid.

I've seen it, I've lived it, I acknowledge it,

And I refuse to become a product of it.
I believe there's more to life...
than ruining your own,
than hurting your loved ones,
than lying,
than dying.

What's ironic about blackberry bushes is even when you tear them down, they never completely go away. You have to be careful when you're susceptible to growing this invasive species. Always stay alert. It festers where the soil is vulnerable, where you might least expect it. Fight it. Don't let it lurk where it's not welcome. Don't let it consume your path. Don't let it be forgotten. But most importantly...

don't *run*.