

The Professional

"In each of us there are two natures. If this primitive duality of man, good and evil, could be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that is unbearable. It is the curse of mankind that these polar twins should be constantly struggling." Robert Louis Stevenson,
Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

It was a phone call that I always knew would come, I just didn't know when. As it happened, it was almost exactly one year ago. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm going to have to go away for a while, and I don't know what is going to happen. I fucked up." He had fucked up many times in my life and his. It always looked bad, but everything always seemed to blow over, to return back to normal. But this time was different. This was the culmination of a lifetime of fuck ups. This was the tipping point.

People say that doctors make the worst patients. The strange case of Dr. Jekyll proves this tired adage true. Dr. Henry Jekyll was a good and honest man, but he was also a crazed man, a homicidal maniac. Dr. Jekyll successfully convinces his friends that his evil nature was in fact a different person, a person known as Mr. Hyde. He resolves to fight off his evil nature himself. My father, Dr. Kelley, also attempted this self medication. True, there were good days, months, maybe even a couple years, but, without notice, the monster would always come back. Dr. Jekyll's evil nature ultimately led to his demise. I often asked myself growing up: would my father die in the face of *his* other nature?

My father is a successful surgeon. He is charismatic. He is intelligent. He is handsome. He is an alcoholic. It's like that old SAT question: which of the following statements does not fit

Mark Kelley

with the rest? Given our typical notions of alcoholics, one is certainly out of place. Alcoholics are lazy, overweight slobs who can't hold down a job. *They* are the town drunk, the lovable barfly that everyone knows and pities. *They* are rarely sober and certainly do not do anything for the greater good of society. *They* are not doctors, lawyers, professors, and editors. Mine is a family of doctors, lawyers, professors and editors. Yet, it is also a family of alcoholics.

How can this be? How can a man who graduated as the top surgeon at Mt. Sinai Medical School show up to work with alcohol still in his system? His confidence, charisma, and intelligence made him a good doctor. They also made him a good alcoholic. Good in the sense that he was good at hiding it, hard to catch. "Is Dad drunk?" I would often ask growing up, not wanting to know but asking anyway.

I remember, as a first grader, being coached by my mom before school: "If anyone asks, tell them Daddy is at a business trip and will be gone for two weeks." This odd statement was sandwiched between her telling me to remember to hand in my spelling homework and not let Aaron Curtin push me down again. Somehow, my mother knew that my teacher would ask. And she did. I remembered my lines, reciting them to my teacher exactly as I had been coached. Although I knew what I was saying wasn't the truth, I didn't really know what the truth was. Only now do I know that he was in Chicago for what seems to have been a crash course AA program. Looking back, I can't help but feel angry toward that teacher, angry that she would try to milk gossip from a child. Her question was more out of a nosey curiosity than anything else.

My mother knew to expect that nosiness in LaSalle-Peru, Illinois, population 18,000. My home town was typical rural small town America; everyone knows your name, everyone knows your business. Beyond this general annoyance lay a more foundational problem. My mother sums it up best: "Peru is a great place to be an alcoholic- just not if you're in recovery." Peru is

Mark Kelley

a place where churches and bars rule the residential district. In fact, St. Valentine's Church and Flo's Bar share a parking lot (not to mention worshippers). My father, however, did not frequent the bars. In fact, I don't remember him ever going to a bar. Perhaps it was because he could not dare be seen with the "common" drunkards of the town, of which there were many. So he drank in secret, alone, sneaking pulls in the bathroom, in the car. He would not let the outside world see his other side. After all, he was a doctor, a man who could cure it all. He was smart enough to control it. He wasn't a *true* alcoholic. He was better than the rest of them.

While my father wasn't better than the average alcoholic, he was different. Just like he couldn't be seen at the local bars, my father couldn't be seen at the local Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Part of it was pride, but it was also a realization about how alcoholism is truly viewed. Who wants a doctor who can't cure himself? It would have been impossible for my father to maintain his medical practice if everyone believed he was a drunk. Therefore, he was destined to fight alone.

For a long time, my family was comfortable going along with this notion, even if we didn't truly believe it. We were willing to let him fight alone as long as he was functional enough to put food on the table. In retrospect, I know that we were selfish. We were foolish. We understood that Peru was not the place for my father but we stayed nonetheless. We were too busy living our lives, preoccupied with living our "normal" life, a life filled with football on Friday nights and church on Sundays. We got pretty good at living the lie, living it long enough to fool even ourselves. Perhaps we thought that if we continued to pretend *it* wasn't real, then maybe *it* would all go away. *It* didn't.

During my childhood, my family had a cabin in a remote section of Lake Wisconsin. I hated that place. Vacation meant that he was free to indulge the worst part of him. Out was Dr.

Mark Kelley

Jekyll, in was Mr. Hyde. He no longer needed to be the professional, the town doctor, the well respected man. We were far away from the responsibilities of home and far away from the watching eyes. One episode is burned into my mind. My father wasn't usually a mean drunk, but this time he appeared to be looking for a fight. "Just go to bed Dad. Go to bed," my eldest brother said. "Fuck you, don't tell me what to do," he snarled back. My father stumbled toward us, face red with a rage I had never seen. After lunging at my eldest brother, my father was restrained by the three younger brothers, including myself. At that moment I saw the worst part of him, the tormented soul that he was able to repress most of the time. I saw a man losing his lonely fight. And yet, it would be another three years until my father finally got help.

The day after the phone call with my father, I received another call. This time it was from a friend's mother. "How is your dad's back?" she asked. Stunned that I was even speaking to this woman, I replied that I wasn't quite sure what she was talking about. "I heard that he left town because he broke his back. If that's not it, what *really* happened?" It was a trap. Upset and confused, I hurriedly said that I had to go, that I would call her back. I didn't. Calling my mother, I asked what I should say. Trying to start my sophomore year at Marquette, I could not help but feel like I was in first grade once again.

Didn't Ezekiel say that "the son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?" Yet, my father's father was an alcoholic. My grandfather's father was too. Children of alcoholics are three times more likely to become alcoholics themselves. I have three brothers and, statistically speaking, one of us will become an alcoholic. It could be argued that in fact, one of us *is* a genetic alcoholic but doesn't know it yet. My brothers and I are blessed with good genes, but it is the genetic tendency toward alcoholism that haunts my mind.

Mark Kelley

It has become impossible for me to deny the effect of my father's alcoholism on my personality. I am the textbook definition of the child of an alcoholic. I fit the psychological profile. I didn't realize how true this was until I got to college and actually read the textbook. Fear of conflict? Check. Constant need to maintain control? Check. Always wanting to please others? Check. Inability to relate to peers? Check. There are many more, some of which I don't fit, most of which I do.

Perhaps the most obvious trait is that I don't drink. I have found that people feel it makes me strange, odd, and perhaps noble. When they ask, the easiest and most honest answer would be to tell them that my father is an alcoholic. I never do. Instead, I give a nondescript reason and the conversation naturally shifts. After I successfully disarm the situation, I find myself asking the same question. Why don't I drink? Part of the answer is pure logic. If someone has a family history of skin cancer, they avoid the sun. Alcoholism has been a cancer to my family, so I choose to avoid it. While this partly answers the question, it is not the whole answer. The truth is that I am afraid. I'm afraid to give alcohol any more power than it already has. I don't want to believe that alcohol will make me more social, more enjoyable to be around, a better version of my present self. I don't want to admit that it can make my life better in any way because, up to this point, it hasn't. For those reasons, I maintain my protective shell, a shell I often resent but refuse to give up.

After that fateful phone call, I didn't see my father for five months. During that time I attempted to continue to live my life while he was trying to rebuild his. He went to a treatment center in Oregon, a place filled with professionals just like him. There were dentists, optometrists, surgeons, but, above all, there were alcoholics. Hailing from across the country,

Mark Kelley

these were men who had thrown away their very successful lives. For what? That was the question they had to ask themselves. I'm not sure what happened at that place, I wasn't there. All I know is that, for the first time in his life, he understood his disease and understood that he needed to change his life.

My family also made necessary changes, recognizing our role in the fight in way we never had before. We moved away from Peru to Ann Arbor, a town that has the resources for professional alcoholics. We sold the cabin. My father enrolled in an Alcoholics Anonymous program geared specifically for professionals. He joined a new medical practice. Things are better than they ever were and he seems to have truly recovered. However, it is important to remember that, while he does not drink, my father is still an alcoholic. Alcoholism is a lifetime struggle, a disease that can be treated but never cured. The moment an alcoholic thinks they have total control is the moment they are most susceptible to relapse. Mr. Hyde still lives within my father. At least now, he's not fighting alone.