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Chasers

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Chasers

Joshua Adair

By the time I set foot in Murray, Kentucky, in 2009, I had been forewarned that the city was chasing a hangover. My dissertation director tipped me off first: after finishing her reference check phone call with a professor from Murray State University's English Department, she expressed concerned amusement. "He kept talking about alcohol," she said with a kind of chuckle, "and it sounds like all they do there is drink. It's very strange." Since she can be rather overcautious, I didn't think much of this until I received a call from that same professor to make arrangements for my on-campus interview. After "How are you?" his next question was "You know that Murray is moist, right?" I didn't know whether to laugh or simply agree. I figured he was referencing the South's higher humidity, though I couldn't imagine why since it was late January. I made some noncommittal murmur that elicited this remark: "So ... you should probably bring your own alcohol to have in the hotel room after—or even before!—your interview and research talk." Alcohol! He meant alcohol! "Oh, okay," I responded, as though this were the most normal conversation in the world. I still didn't really have a clue what he meant.

Our conversation traversed the expected content—where to park, interview length, etc.—

and then suddenly came round to booze once more. "Don't forget a corkscrew!" he shouted. "Excuse me?" I ventured, wondering whether he'd enjoyed a pre-call pour. "That's a common problem with our job candidates: they don't take us seriously when we tell them there is *NO* package alcohol for sale anywhere in town. Or if they do, then they usually remember the wine and forget the corkscrew." "Oh, I see, yeah, okay, thanks." I didn't dare ask if people were really so eager to spend an interview drunk. Our final order of business—selecting a location for my research talk—somehow, incredibly, also managed to center upon alcohol. He said a classroom could be reserved for the purpose, which I indicated was my preference since I intended to project images to accompany my talk about house museums. "You could do that," he offered, "but I would choose the Faculty Club instead." When I asked if the Club had a projector, the answer was no. "But you don't seriously want to give a talk to a room full of sober people, do you?" I thought I did, but I was starting to worry that would make me seem too sober.

"Moist," as it turned out, meant that restaurants and bars in Murray were able to serve alcohol by the glass or pitcher so long as those sales were roughly equally matched by a food

purchase. This model for controlling access to and consumption of alcohol was apparently relatively new in the town. It had been dry since Prohibition, caught in a seemingly endless hangover of arcane, religiously inflected Blue Laws. According to a number of folks, the sale of alcohol in any form was considered outrageous by some, who prophesied doom and destruction. For others, it offered hope that the endless stupor of Prohibition might give way, finally, after nearly a hundred years of ensuring that the good times would not, in fact, roll. As an outsider, I was astonished to discover that such laws persisted into the 21st century. I had no idea that there were places in the U.S. that didn't sell package liquor or, worse yet, didn't sell any alcohol whatsoever. I began to understand that professor's fiendish fascination with stockpiling the sauce.

When I arrived in Murray for my two-day interview, I learned more about the effects of alcohol on the body, mind, and soul than I did anything else. Shortly after I settled into my hotel room, a new faculty member arrived to take me to dinner. We exchanged pleasantries in the doorway, where he asked, "Is Thai food okay?" I tried to say sure, but before I'd even spit it out, he was already hurling back, "We can have drinks there!" For a moment, I wondered if this is what it's like to visit a prison inmate, deprived and jonesing for contraband. I agreed, realizing that there wouldn't be any pre-game nutrition to fight a hangover that night. The dynamic of the ensuing meal was rather strange since a major ice storm

had just started and my companion was the only faculty member new and brave enough to risk an evening out. I suspected the others were nursing hot toddies in the safety of their own homes and dreaming of charming me the next day with their firewater fairy tales. For much of our first hour together, we tackled the topic of tipples and their scarcity. He regaled me with yarns about faculty driving to the nearest liquor stores in bordering Tennessee or Paducah, KY, to buy cases of their spirit of choice. From his charming description, one would have imagined this was the most valiant humanitarian effort ever launched, with folks banding together to pick up supplies for friends and colleagues. Everyone, apparently, shared the burden of impending impairment. I kept it to one drink that night, fearing this drunkenness—or the even more heinous hangover—that every job advice manual stringently cautions against. Once I had returned to my hotel room, as I attempted to coax on sleep, I conjured a scenario wherein I refused the drinks and was sent into the dark of night at once for clear lack of collegiality.

Throughout my interview day, I marveled at alcohol's ability to hang over the entire proceedings. Even self-proclaimed teetotalers brought the subject up, the restriction of liberty obsessing even the nonparticipants. At lunch, senior faculty joked about the lack of alcohol in the campus-adjacent restaurant they'd selected. They assuaged my perceived disappointment by telling me the bar had recently been restocked at the Faculty Club. Even the student worker who

toured me around campus in the middle of the ice storm felt the need to announce, with great earnestness, that should I accept the position I would definitely need to bring all the liquor I could carry from Northern Illinois. I imagined abandoning all my worldly goods and opting instead for a booze-filled U-Haul. I might fashion furniture out of wine crates in my new, liquored landscape. Since it was clear the student didn't care to talk about the library or the nearest gym, I asked her, "Do you think students drink more because of this limited access?" "Look around you," she quipped, "this campus is a constant hangover." I saw a number of pained, zombie-esque students plodding the frozen paths. I'd assumed their anguish stemmed from the ice storm, especially since it was a Monday.

Later that day, when I gave my research talk in a classroom, attendance was sparse. Yes, everything was covered in ice, but I also wasn't serving anything with ice. After I concluded, a small group of us gingerly skated across campus to the Faculty Club for the long-anticipated reception, which drew a bigger crowd. I had expected some dimly lit institutional building with a graduate student playing bartender and classical musical softly wafting through the room. What I found was a 1930s Colonial Revival house—a club in name only—with liquor assembled on the table of what was otherwise a very ordinary dining room. If you know the scene in *Interview with the Vampire* in which a coven of famished vampires descends en masse upon a single victim, then you know that dining table's experience. The company was amiable and engaging, though

we discussed Schnapps as often as Shakespeare. The denial of alcohol, I now think, left them in a kind of perpetual hangover both because they felt deprived and because many of them frequently overimbibed to compensate for that perceived (but rarely, if ever, actual) deprivation. I joined in the fun—I never was one to turn down a drink—and then rounded out the evening in a campus bar, where I was treated to dinner.

I was hired for the position several weeks later and moved to Murray in June, 2009. I managed to forget all those dire decrees about bringing alcohol with me, so I showed up empty-handed. It was a real shock to me when, still in the midst of unpacking, it struck me that I couldn't have a drink unless I wanted to drive a considerable distance or go out alone, since I didn't really know anyone, to a restaurant or bar. For the first time, I felt the panic of an addict. Just the idea that I couldn't easily acquire alcohol set off an unreasonable craving in me. In the coming weeks and months, I started mentioning alcohol more and more to friends and family via email or phone as they checked in on me and my new place. I'm certain they saw it as the fastest onset of abject alcoholism they'd ever witnessed. A lingering feeling of loss and near-asphyxiation came over me when I realized what this restriction signaled about the culture I'd moved into. I wanted to drink defiantly, to rebel against the Bible-Belt conservatism that drove such measures. After a few months, I started to grasp that all my interviewees—now mycolleagues—weren't so much dependent on drink as they were experiencing

the hangover of lost freedom. We had all, somehow, stepped back in time and forfeited something for the coveted tenure-track life. And now we were all traipsing about, raving like Cassandra, decrying doom and downfall in our drinkless domain. That's dramatic. We could have gone out to a restaurant or bar and drunk ourselves silly, one glass or pitcher at a time, but it was the principle of the thing, you see. We wanted it when and how we wanted it, and some nameless, faceless, Foucauldian power refused our demands.

Then, early in 2015, a movement got afoot to legalize package liquor sales. The endeavor, known as "Grow Murray," highlighted the local tax revenue (and so town wellbeing) that would be raised by such a measure. I and many of my friends and colleagues quickly signed on to this long-awaited hair-of-the-dog campaign. We wanted our cure, and fast. It didn't take long for things to turn Old Testament, though. As quickly as yard signs were planted and t-shirts were donned, the opposition found their voices and Bible verses suddenly started serving as icebreakers. Prophesying quickly became commonplace in the classroom and the checkout line at Kroger. The end days were at hand, and we all knew it. We awaited a revelation.

We supporters knew that the chaser we craved was within slurping distance. Kentucky, we felt certain, was about to lurch forward into the cocktail-crazed '50s, at least. *Mad Men* would seduce us all. Our opposition, predictably, sought to safeguard Prohibition with a little help from the book of fire and brimstone. Without any sense of irony or impishness, folks were sud-

denly decrying the drunks in the gutter, warning that more were already en route to our fair town. They would come pre-mussed to save us the difficulty of identifying their role in this passion play. "You better get ready to protect your women!" a nontraditional student bellowed at me one day before class started, a la John Wayne, apropos of nothing. "Excuse me?" I half-barked, half-chortled. "If that law passes," he said, "none of your womenfolk will be safe. There'll be rapes and robberies ever'where." I couldn't decide whether to point out that the vast majority of the U.S. allowed package liquor sales without descending into frontier lawlessness or just to start thundering Old West nonsense at him in return. I opted for the former and was treated to my first impromptu Greek tragedy chorus, my composition students overflowing with dark prognostications about faithlessness and sin and the encroachment of the mid-20th century into their God-fearing lives. I stopped the deluge by reminding them that purchasing and consuming alcohol would not, should the law pass, be compulsory. Several looked at me like they were seeing me anew, fully aware that I might be the one forcing them into keg stands, funnel in hand.

Shortly after, my headaches subsided; the measure passed by a mere 200 votes. Since it would take months to get package sales started, we celebrated over drinks at our favorite bar. We regaled one another with our own tales of restricted alcohol sales woes: romantic nights short-circuited by sobriety, legitimate problems faced with no perceptible BAC, bright-eyed

mornings filled with exercise and energy. Clearly, none of us really understood the extent of what we had endured individually, but it helped to unburden ourselves collectively and rejoice that we had finally banished President Wilson's pernicious policies from our lives. In the midst of our revelry, I glanced over to the bar just in time to glimpse the student who had been so chivalrous about the fate of the womenfolk. He flashed me a rather sheepish grin, raising his beer mug to air-toast me before exhaling his cigarette smoke and turning back to his friend. I was floored: what had all that damnation nonsense been about? I recounted the story to the table and asked for insight.

His behavior, if my cronies were to be countenanced, was its own variety of Bible-belt hangover. I grouched that that guy had even advertised free rides to the courthouse for church folk to vote. My friend, who had taught in Murray since the '60s, smirked a little, chuckled, and said, "You're still new to the South." Not taking his meaning, I asked him to expand.

"It's not considered polite here to point out someone else's drinking. Many folks hold religious or quasi-religious objections. In fact, most will deny drinking even as they have the glass in their hands. Many of my neighbors who have consumed countless cocktails with me planted those 'Vote NO to Alcohol' signs in their yards even as they voted the contrary. We'll all simply avert our eyes when we cross paths at the liquor store and pretend as though no conflict exists. It's not polite to point out hypocrisy. That's how it's done here."

His explanation, of course, cleared a fog-giness about many features of life in the South that had persisted in my mind for so long. It also goes a long way toward explaining the recent turn of events with our national election. Going through the motions of resisting change and so-called sin is, here, more important than actually committing to any of that dogma. But we outsiders practiced the same style of artificial resistance when we painted ourselves as insatiable drunks incapable of surviving without a liquor store. Alcohol is one of many flashpoints in this place, and no real moral quandary is posed by telegraphing disapproval and then washing it down with a nice Kentucky bourbon. It's simply what one does. Some hangovers, especially of the cultural variety, have no known antidote except loud acquiescence followed by quiet defiance.

Late last year, our local alcoholism became a bit more abject, figuratively speaking. Our city council, after much deliberation, voted to institute limited alcohol sales on Sundays. This time, only a few Henny Pennys showed up to cluck about the sky and its imminent shattering. Three and a half years after the initial "wet" vote, many folks' fear hangover had vanished thanks to the new revenue stream this change brought—a chaser just about everyone could swallow. They found it much harder to make the case for Hades when they saw, along with many other benefits, the increased police surveillance and shiny, new, tricked-out cruisers that the devil's brew had bestowed upon us all. Our friends and neighbors, and even strangers, seem nicer now. I don't even have to avert my eyes when I buy cheap wine at

the Rite-Aid, and this is a surefire sign of progress.

In the intervening years, most of the surrounding counties—including those that had long housed distilleries unable to sell their product locally—followed suit to ratify alcohol sales. At the very least, we've all chugged a Gatorade, choked down an Alka-Seltzer Gold, and started to recover from one especially peculiar hangover of our local history.