

Reverse Bartending and Wilted Wings

by **Tessa Torgeson**

My peers poured craft beer into frosted mugs for the miniskirt wearing set that clutched their smart phones with manicured fingers. Meanwhile, a few blocks away I poured Karkov vodka into yellowed Tupperware containers for people wearing yesterday's clothes, their hands shaking with delirium tremens. I went to AA meetings.

I called myself a reverse bartender. My role was to be a compassionate security guard/receptionist, a job that required me to mediate/allot liquor/enforce rules/listen/tend to emergencies. My technical job title was "mental health technician", but I never liked that title because I thought it made me sound like a computer. Things need fixing. People need compassion.

I worked at a newly developed public housing project called Housing First designed for people who were both chronically homeless and chemically dependent. It was a fifty-unit apartment building with a surprisingly modern design, kitty corner from a strip club and conveniently down the alley from a liquor store. Housing First allowed residents a daily liquor allotment, thus it was a radical departure from most public housing programs for people with chemical dependency issues that were abstinence only. On those programs, if you relapsed/pissed dirty/got caught with alcohol, you were booted back to the gutter. As a result, drunks literally froze to death in Fargo. One drunk forty-year-old man froze to death last winter, passed out on the steps of the Cathedral because he had been evicted and shelters wouldn't take him. Housing First took a humanitarian approach, called harm reduction, that teaches people how to be safer about drinking and using, offers health options and housing. It is more cost effective than the revolving doors of jails, institutions, and ERs.

I heard about Housing First through my friend from Texas, Aly, who was my trainer when I joined the staff. We sat in a tiny office that staff referred to as "the chicken coop," with security cameras, giant glass windows, and a buzzer tenants and visitors

used to gain entrance. On my first day working for Housing First, immediately, the buzzer sounded. A man with tapestries of tattoos on his face and body came in the entryway. His belly peeked under a spikey vest littered with railroad train-hopper patches.

“Trey, this is Tessa. She’s new here. Be nice to her.”

“Of course, Miss Ally, I’ll try to be nice. Good to meet you, miss.”

“I know you will. Just want you to make her feel welcome because she’s an old friend of mine. You’re looking good. How many days have you been clean this time?”

“Ten. Been eating real food again.” He talked out of the side of his mouth, and his teeth were like stalactites hanging from its roof. The left side of his body had frozen and he had to drag it along like luggage. “I gotta run, so I’ll see you guys later.”

“He got into some kinda accident when he was strung out on meth and heroin,” Aly explained. “Nobody really knows what happened but he’s got a lot of brain damage. He pretty much keeps to himself but will disappear for weeks on end hopping the trains to go to hobo conventions.”

“Seems like an interesting guy.”

“We got a lot of them. He’s one of the more talkative ones. Some of the residents really just want to be buzzed in and out and don’t want to chit-chat. Others are so lonely they’re just starving for connection.”

We chatted about clients and policies for a few minutes until a man in tattered jeans with a handlebar mustache stumbled in. Bulges the shape of bottles protruded from his pockets.

“I see the bottles sticking out of your pockets.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rob slurred as he tried to shift his coat to conceal the bottles.

“You know the rules. You checked in your liquor max for the day at 3 pm, hun. By the way, this is Tessa. She’s a new staff.” Turning to me, she said, “Tessa, there’s a little chart right here about the maximum amount each client can check in per day.”

Harm reduction liquor allotment chart:

500 ML of hard liquor

24 cans of 12 ounce beer

12 cans of 24 ounce beer

4 bottles of 40 ounce beer

(Please encourage clients to drink beer instead of hard liquor because it has lower alcohol content and fills them up faster).

Two bottles of wine

Aly used a liquid measuring cup and poured the liquor from the bottles he'd attempted to hide in his pockets into a Tupperware container, as casually as if she were baking chocolate chip cookies. The alcohol burned like napalm on my nostrils, my gag reflex choking. She put the container on Rob's shelf in the staff cupboard. Cheap rail brands lined the shelves: Karkov, Silverwolf, and E&J. I was plenty familiar with such brands. A bottom shelf girl.

Aly left to prep for the next day's food bank. A resident crashed through the entryway wearing a baggy blue Roca coat and jeans, a blue bandana wrapped around her head, and blue Air Jordans.

"Who the fuck are you?" She slurred, slamming down a fifth of Karkov vodka on the counter. (My friends in college called it Car Crash; I called it my demise.)

"I'm Tessa. I'm new."

"Hurry up and check this shit in. I gotta get drizz-unk." She gestured with her hands in a spinning motion.

"What's your name?"

"Lola. Like the song. Don't ever call me that or I'll smash your head in."

I measured 500 milliliters of the arsenic and recorded it in the liquor log. Again my nostrils burned. I tasted it in my throat. Lola handed me a Tupperware to dump it in. I wrote her name on the bottle, laughing at the threat by a woman about half my size.

Tonight was busy because a lot of residents had just finished working at day labor stints at the new Wal-Mart on the edge of town. Instant cash. Instant booze.

Just as Lola got in the elevator, a character named Waltzing Will sashayed past her from the community room. Will shimmied over to the staff window and leaned on it for support. He had stars in his eyes. Distant and missive.

Aly had returned and greeted him. “Hey, Will, there’s a new staff. I think you’ll like her a lot.”

“Welcome to the nut house,” he said. “I’m kinda drunk but I’ll talk to you another time. I should really go up to my room.”

It was a typical night at Housing First. But then there was really no such thing as a typical night. But the mornings offered predictable hangovers and delirium tremens. Residents clutched the guardrails of the elevator with unsteady hands and sweaty palms. Beads of sweat decorated their foreheads, highlighting reptilian skin, yellow and jaundiced as bananas. They shuffled to the office to retrieve their precious remaining liquor from the previous day. They arrived with an alchemy of internal detox symptoms: irritability, nausea, anxiety, psychosis, confusion, and depression. We doled out their medicine like pharmacists.

This was harm reduction, grittier than neat academics. Such reduction was an art learned on the streets. It was folklore; it was science. We asked residents to mix Gatorade with their vodka and coat their stomachs with food pantry pastries. We asked them to switch to beer. We asked them if they would go to detox for a few days where they could get some real food and give their bodies a break from drinking and their minds a break from the chaos of the other residents.

We asked because asking was quintessentially what it meant to practice harm reduction instead of telling them how to live, the way other programs do. Meeting people where they were, light or dark. Most often the grey space in between.

“They don’t want to change,” Aly said while sanitizing the phone. “We’re just keeping them alive, for now.”

“Keeping them alive” entailed strange methods such as throwing away client’s hidden bottle stashes in the nearby bakery shipping yard, alleys, and parking lots. I’d hidden enough bottles in my day to know the good places. I put on my mauve bubble duster coat circa 1980, strapped on my checkered bomber hat, and slipped into my fingerless gloves. I lit up a Camel. History repeated itself, so did bottle hidings. Lola hid her Smirnoff under the loading dock dumpster. Rob hid his E&J bottles in the alley underneath neighbor’s yard ornaments. Gary hid his cooking wine on the 10th Street underpass by the strip club. When he was broke, he bought cooking wine with food

stamps. Cooking wine was particularly high with toxic chemicals and not meant for consumption in large quantities.

I put confiscated bottles on my supervisor's shelf with a large label, "DUMP," alongside office supplies. She kept them as evidence. People asked if it was hard for me to clutch such poison in my hands and so close to my lip's reach. It was and it wasn't. Some days I dreamed of careening into the comforting arms of oblivion again.

The nostalgia never lasted long. Working at Housing First reminded me of the rusty road liquor paved.

After working at Housing First for a few months, I got to know the ebb and flow of the chaos, the silence, and the drunken debauchery. The best part of my job was getting to know the clients. I developed a huge soft spot for Gary and his buddy Catfish. The duo was inseparable. Catfish spun tall tales of catching his namesake bare-handed in the swamps of the south. He taught Gary about his kind of survival: day labor and trampin' around at dusk for pocket change, snipes, and the occasional treasure. Gary taught Catfish about flight—literally and figuratively. Gary was fascinated by flight patterns, ornithology, wings. Prone to soaring bouts of mania, he knew flight viscerally.



"Farcical Play" by Leonard Kogan (oil on paper)

When Gary was not too drunk to be in the community room, he watched PBS documentaries online. One of the few literate residents, Gary taught others how to use the computer, especially social networking and Wikipedia.

Gary introduced Catfish and other residents to Poe's "Nevermore," so from then on both were transfixed with crows. During their benders, both were keen on opening

Catfish's window and making crow calls to any passerby in the parking lot, whether they were housing staff, EMTs, or police. The aftermath was Gary's famous booming cackle, other residents' yelling, slamming of doors, and complaints to the front desk.

Complaining residents became incessant. Gary even received a formal complaint, "Consider this a verbal warning for crowing out of your window and irritating other residents and staff. Further warnings will result in disciplinary notice."

Staff were told to discourage the behavior, but I laughed every time I heard them crow during my break.

"Hey, Tess, come hang out with us on your next hall check. Come say hi!" Gary yelled.

I often knocked on room 304 during my hall rounds and chatted with Catfish and Gary. They usually offered me a cigarette, which I usually declined. They both were interested in literature. As an English major, they were always curious to know what I was reading.

I became reluctantly attached to the residents despite the many ways they tried to push us away with yelling, odors, name-calling, and slamming doors. I guess I knew I could have been one of them had I kept drinking. I felt there was a shortage of compassion and that was one thing I had. I didn't know if I was good at anything except caring for people society threw away.

"Why can't you just get a normal job?" my mom jokingly lamented. My family worried about me working in a triggering environment. But I couldn't quit. Even though seeing people at rock bottom often left me emotionally drained. Even though I've seen way too many sagging body parts and mopped up too many bodily fluids. Even though I felt a cognitive dissonance between giving people alcohol at work and abstaining from alcohol at home. I needed Housing First as much as the residents. Basking in codependence, I needed to be needed.

A year and a half later, I took a position within the same company as a case aide where I helped Housing First and other public housing residents with basic living tasks like shopping, cleaning, budgeting, and socializing. I was excited that Gary would be

one of my clients, as we had continued to bond over nature documentaries and the cosmos, but I dreaded cleaning his apartment. He was on the verge of eviction. His efficiency apartment was a palace of grime, where towers of mold, stale food, and cigarette butts leaned on the countertops, floor, and furniture. He was not a slob out of laziness or stupidity, he just did not know how to maintain an apartment after living on the streets for so long.

I came armed with a bucket of dollar store cleaning supplies sufficient to blast through a minefield or the aftermath of a fraternity party. Gary peered at the bucket quizzically. When I asked him to mop after I swept, he poured bleach straight on the floor and put paper towels underneath his feet. He tried to warm up bleach in the microwave and we almost started a chemical fire. He then collapsed into his armchair that was littered with sunflower seed shells, banana peels, and shreds of tobacco. I used my best motivational techniques to try to help him recognize the serious threat of eviction. The other staff helped me turbo clean his apartment before inspection, with a little assistance from Vick's vapor rub under our nostrils to mask the putrid smells. Gary offered profuse thanks. But he continued to marinate himself in cooking wine day after day, lighting matches as he chain-smoked. And we could only put out fires for so long.

Gary was found passed out in a snowbank outside Housing First. Staff carried him inside and offered him medical attention, which he declined. Gary warmed up and began drinking again. After Gary was banned from the nearest grocery store for stealing cooking wine, he blew a BAC that was seven times the legal limit. Yet Gary somehow continued to survive.

One day I went to his apartment to visit. "Holy shit, you're on fire, Gary." I pointed to his moustache, which was ablaze as he lit another hand-rolled cigarette.

"Oh that's the smell of burning hair, isn't it just lovely! I'll be okay, Tessa."

It was hard not to laugh. Gary was in flight and he wanted me to come with him. He paced around the room anxiously, muttering about unintelligible subjects under his breath.

"I'll be back tomorrow to check on you. Remember we're going to go get some groceries and your work boots?" I said.

The next day Gary was swooping back down: quiet, withdrawn. We listened to AM radio and he spoke about some current events as we strolled through the shoe aisle. He picked the first pair that fit. I told him he could spend more, but he declined.

“Thank you. Thank you for the new boots. I don’t know why you keep helping me. But you’re . . . you’re something else.”

The next day Gary was gone, so I went back again on Monday. I followed the mud-caked foot step trail across the white linoleum and up three flights of stairs. Each landing had its own scents and superstitions. I rounded the fourth flight and took a right. I was greeted by streaks of toothpaste and foreign substances on his door. The pungent smell of stale tobacco and rotted fruit wafted into the hall.

I rapped as hard as my skinny knuckles allowed. Silence. I tilted my ear against the door to listen for the steady KFGO blaring in the background. Nothing.

His best friend Catfish’s door swung open across the hall. This was the man who made crow calls with Alan Jackson playing in the background. He wore his fading orange camo pants slung low, challenging the fabric’s elasticity.

“Haven’t seen Gary in three days since I quit drinking. Had to take a break at detox.” He pounded and pounded on Gary’s door with calloused knuckles.

“Open up you crazy bastard!”

We swung his door open.

He was in repose by the kitchen counter, dirt crusted hands neatly clasped across his lap. His lips were cracked and bleeding and slightly parted. His skin looked pallid, with a slightly reptilian sheen.

I expected his tobacco tinged, maniacal laugh to resonate over the concrete walls like a pipe organ. I waited for him to say how he needed to lay off the cooking sherry. His wrist was arctic, his arms completely rigid.

I put my ear next to his heart and there was a colossal silence. I rubbed my knuckles against his sternum like they instruct in CPR to wake somebody.

Please believe me when I say that I wanted the thrum of my own steady heart to resuscitate his. Please believe me when I say that I was hoping for him to take flight.

I called 911. The EMTs said that he was beyond revival. I couldn’t remember the muddled faces of all of the cops on the scene, but I remember when the cop with the

bottle tan and leftover crust crumbs in his mustache pronounced Gary's time of death at 10:04 a.m.

There was no autopsy, obituary, casket, gravestone, or burial site. But after nine years of sleeping on the streets anonymously, I was grateful that Gary died in a home of his own. He had a flowered Rival crock pot, a dusty Emerson radio that crackled and spit on the AM stations, a twin sized bed, and a recliner of questionable color and odor.

He taught others that food stamps could be used to buy cooking sherry. And that was his demise.

Nick Flynn writes of his experience working with the homeless in his memoir, *The Ticking is The Bomb*. One night on homeless outreach, Flynn discovered a man passed out on a bench and tried to bring him to the shelter. The man resisted. Turned volatile. An hour later, they checked again and found the man unresponsive. The man was pronounced dead. Turns out hypothermia, in its extreme form, mimics drunkenness. Flynn wrote, "I didn't put my boot on John Doe's head and push him under the waves, but I also know that I wandered through the next many years feeling as if I had."

It is with that same heaviness that I got through my work days, haunted, and zipped shut. I wonder still if I had arrived three hours earlier, could I have revived him? Did he even want to be revived?

Our mental health team worked with the most "severe persistently mentally ill and chemically dependent" population in the county mental health system. We worked with forgotten people who plummeted through cataclysmic rifts in the system through no fault of their own. Our clients' average lifespan was fifteen years less than that of the overall population, due to chronic mental health struggles, addiction, trauma, homelessness, and other environmental stressors.

These statistics are abysmal black holes that threaten to swallow my residents. To people who have never been in the trenches of this black hole, it may seem that Gary and my residents would all be doomed to a subterranean existence. But what I saw was them trying with all the force of their beings to burrow towards the light. Light just looks different for some people. I saw light each time the residents would help unpack the food bank truck in bone-chilling thirty-degree below zero weather to help

others, or when they tenderly nursed each other's collective wounds with hugs or socks to the stomach when needed, with a hot pot roast, with a hand-rolled cigarette, with beer. Light was some residents' version of taking flight.

I guess I chose to see strength in fragility, the need to give compassion and dignity to people society threw away. Partly because I saw parts of myself in Gary. Some days I too chose darkness, other days I chose that elusive, immeasurable, intangible thing called "hope." The minute I stop having hope is the minute I must find a different line of work. Or become a mortician. Make some potato salad for funerals. Embalm bodies. Powder faces to make them look alive.



Tessa Torgeson is a social worker by day and writer by night who lives and freezes in Fargo, North Dakota. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Oregon Humanities Magazine*, *Role/Reboot*, *Rkvry Quarterly Literary Journal*, and *Doll Hospital*, among others. She is currently working on a memoir. Tessa also likes to write and trade zines, and would like to revive the dying art of snail-mail. You can learn more about her work at tessatorgeson.com.

Leonard Kogan (art) lives and works in Baltimore, MD. The com-positional structure in his works represents fragmentary set-stages and painterly encounters of bodies and organisms. Kogan's works are synthesis of the ubiquitous, trivial, marginal, and dislocated. The paintings are saturated with associative flashbacks, emotional and social references. The color spectrum of Kogan's works stretch from impressionistic and melodramatic palettes to lurid and psychedelic hues. His work has been featured in a number of literary and art magazines. "Farcical Play" (oil on paper; 22 x 30 in.; 2011 – 2016)