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BLOOD
FROM A
STONE

*A Memoir
of How Wine
Brought
Me Back
from the
Dead*



Taken from *Blood From a Stone* by Adam McHugh.

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WINE HAPPENS



This is the story of how wine brought me back from the dead. If I want to be more provocative, I could say a hearty portion of this story is how my life and work as a minister drove me to wine. Tales about drink and religion usually go the other way. Ordinarily in these stories a renowned Saturday-night lush wakes up to become a Sunday-morning teetotaler. I'm all for that when the alternatives are addiction and self-annihilation, but otherwise I think freshly discovered faith should be rewarded with a generous pour of something good. The path will get rough, trust me. Wine will help.

I was ordained as a Presbyterian, but I grew up a Lutheran. I was an only child—a fact that always prompts people to say, “That explains *so much*.” My parents and I were a mildly church-going family, though most of the prayers offered in our household went up on Saturdays during University of Washington football games. Our minister back then would talk from the pulpit about the scotch he drank the night before. I don't remember his name, but I do remember he told me that my nerdish high

school persona would one day translate into popularity with girls. So he was both a drinker *and* a liar. I underwent the two-year confirmation process in that Lutheran church to become a full-fledged member, though my dad made sure to stress that my studies were the priority.

Surprising to us all, during my senior year of high school, I found myself sitting in a Southern Baptist church. And not only on Sunday mornings. Often, I was there on Sunday nights as well, when I should have been studying. Southern Baptists have a lot of time for church because they are not out drinking on weekends. I spent so much of my time there for the same reason any seventeen-year-old boy avidly attends church. Her name was Hannah—she had a biblical name and legs that inspired much Bible study. She was the captain of the dance team at our high school, with long, fiery hair and the almost transparent alabaster skin tone only truly revealed in Pacific Northwest gloom. That relationship was heartache, but those abstemious Republicans at that church taught me a more spirited experience of religion than I had known before. Ironic, because they tried to persuade me that the cup of the Last Supper was nonalcoholic.

The truth is the ancient world knew no such thing as unfermented grape juice, at least not with a shelf life longer than Nana's afternoon nap. Grape juice doesn't happen for long without refrigeration and airtight seals. I suppose our ancestors could have boiled freshly squeezed juice to preserve it, but then they would be spreading it on Fertile Crescent rolls, not drinking it, and even then ambient yeasts would slowly make it into a happy brunch or sour vinegar. Grape juice as we know it wasn't invented until the 1860s, by a Methodist minister named Thomas Bramwell Welch, who was shocked to discover that all these wild grapes, without adult supervision, were turning into wine. He was determined to take the alcohol out of Communion wine and put a swift end to the wild Sunday sunrise parties raging in churches across the land. The advent of grape juice was an

opening salvo in the war for national prohibition, bathtub gin, and organized crime. Reverend Welch employed the new tools available to his era: pasteurization—precisely heating a liquid to kill bacteria and alcohol-producing yeast, and refrigeration—cooling the juice to the point that airborne yeasts couldn’t reactivate fermentation. Welch cooked up a few batches of what he called “unfermented wine,” and Welch’s grape juice was born. Church got just a little bit more boring.



When I tell religious types that I used to work in ministry and now I work in wine, I get one of three reactions. If I am talking to a Southern Baptist or a Pentecostal, I get squinty eyes and sharp intakes of breath, pamphlets for healing prayer groups, signs of the cross while slowly backing away. I once put out on the internet that I keep a wine journal, and an evangelical type responded, “Is that like an alcoholic’s diary?” But, if I tell the same thing to a Catholic or an Episcopalian, they exclaim, “Oh, that totally follows! Let me buy you a drink!” If I am talking to a Presbyterian or a Lutheran, I am awarded a lecture about craft beer. At one of my first wine jobs, we used to call these types “beerdos,” which works on two levels because they have beards and are weird about beer.

Yet it was their equally eccentric hero, Martin Luther, who said, “Beer is made by men, wine by God,” and before lab-manufactured grape juice, eight thousand years of religious tradition around the world declared that wine was a gift of the gods. Wine was not invented or conceived of by humans. *Wine was discovered.* It is not unlike the first time a guy hit two rocks together in frustration, sent up a spark, smoked out everyone in the cave, and slept outside alone that night.

All it takes to create wine are wild grapevines, sunlight to ripen sugars, and some peripatetic yeasts. There was probably a woman, a

gatherer of wild grapes, who filled her basket to the brim and left it for a while. The grapes at the bottom were crushed by the weight, and they surrendered their juice to the yeasts wandering by and pausing on the grape skins, which then completed their proper vocation, transforming the sugars in the juice into alcohol and carbon dioxide. Wine, you see, wanted to be found.

When our sober ancestor returned to her basket after some time, the juice was bubbling and alive and strangely warm. Something had changed. It was a sticky and tantalizing blend of sweet and sour. It smelled different, it tasted different, and it felt different. When she tasted it, something changed in her. Her head felt a little lighter, her face a little warmer, her body a little freer. It was the ancient world's first mellow buzz.

Wine in its rawest form isn't made. *Wine happens*. Here is a little playful trickery, an intoxicating accident, a miracle tripped over. An elixir that can make a laborious life just a little bit easier. It would take a long while to figure out how to make and store good wine and how to recreate the miracle consistently. But over time the mystics, poets, and philosophers would come to celebrate wine for its ability to open the mind and free the body, to reveal the secrets of the heart, and to banish fear and worry. As the Roman poet Horace encouraged his friends, "Smooth out with wine the worries of a wrinkled brow." Is it any wonder that wine became the centerpiece of religious tables and a core symbol of heaven's love for earth that continues to this day? The ancient lyrics exult that "wine gladdens the human heart" and "cheers both gods and mortals."

At the time these wine revelations were first taking hold of me, I was leading a life that needed a tall glass of gladdening. I lived thirty miles or so east of Los Angeles, that sunny megalopolis I had once heckled from my misty northwestern perch of Seattle, and I was driving the 210 to the 605 to the 10 to nursing homes and strange neighborhoods at all hours of the day and night. I was a hospice chaplain.

If you are unfamiliar, hospice is end-of-life care, a service for the terminally ill, for when the doctor throws up his hands and says, “There is nothing more I can do.” And I was a chaplain, a minister working outside church walls, who showed up at death’s door to listen or pray or sit quietly at grieving bedsides. For a while I worked daytime shifts, and the sunshine illuminating my drives between nursing homes and shining in the windows of living rooms converted into dying rooms kept my spirits lighter. But then I was moved to the on-call night shift, when my work schedule became midnight to eight in the morning.

I was a hospice chaplain, working the graveyard shift. I was the Grim Reaper’s wingman.

When a patient was dealing with an emotional or spiritual issue after hours, I was summoned. I would get a call at three in the morning that a patient was threatening suicide, which wakes you up considerably faster than coffee, believe me. I would keep him on the phone as long as I could, urgently empathizing, asking questions about the specificity of his plan, with a second phone nearby if I needed to call 911.

Those were the extreme situations, but most of my work was what we called “death visits.” A patient on our service would die in the night, and Telecare would alert me to go help the family cope with their loss. Each night I slept, or tried to sleep, with a beeper next to my ear. Yes, a bona fide circa-1991 beeper. For the record, when you take a beeper to the City of Industry in the middle of the night, people will assume you are a drug dealer.

After that dreadful piece of retro-tech would scream me awake, making my heart beat out of my neck, I would gather myself and don a button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves and khaki pants, the outfit of choice for the casual, off-hours hospice chaplain. Then I would drive my black 2003 Honda CRV through the starless LA night, battling my grogginess with saccharine pop music, to the patient’s

house to witness the death. I would walk in the door and everyone would clear a path. “Shhhh, the minister is here,” they would say. Sometimes the family would want me to sound official, to make a “pronouncement,” so I would put two fingers on the patient’s neck for a few seconds and then summon my best primetime doctor impression to say, “Time of death: 4:40 a.m., January 23.” Then I would close the patient’s eyes. I would call the funeral home, flush the Morphine and Ativan and other meds down the toilet, and then, if they wanted, sit with the family until the men in suits and white gloves appeared with a gurney, usually ninety minutes later. Then I would never see that family again.

Those were hard nights. In the years I did that job, they never got easier. I played a meaningful role, and the families I passed in the nights were usually grateful for my prayers, yet I felt there was a certain futility to it all. Secretly, I wondered if I was doomed to wander the earth in the dark watches of the night like Jacob Marley, observing human misery, unable to do much of anything about it.

In my off hours, I was the only person I knew who could drain the life out of the most jovial cocktail party by simply mentioning what I did for a living. Here would be an unsuspecting accountant just trying to make a little small talk, reaching for a piece of smoked gouda, asking innocuously, “So, Adam, what do you do for work?”

“Uhhh, well, I’m a chaplain and grief counselor in, um, hospice,” I would stammer. The record would scratch, the room would freeze, and a Southern lady in the corner would faint. They would look at me like I just said, “I am a hit man, and *you* are my next target.” It turns out that the only public topic more distasteful than religion is death.

In my work, I suffered regularly from what is officially called “compassion fatigue,” and what unofficially feels like walking in ten feet of water. Everything is slow, exhausting, and a little blurry. I felt trapped in my best intentions to do good, flailing in a world that was

slowly drowning me. Strangers always said, upon finding out I worked in hospice, “Oh, that takes a really special person.” I knew I wasn’t that special. At the same time, I did truly want to help people, to find genuine connection, to offer a teaspoon of comfort to these families on one of the worst nights of their lives. I was taking my shoes off to stand on holy ground night after night, sometimes holding hands with patients when they took their final breath. But then I would look down after a while and see that my naked feet were dirty and calloused and stained with blood. It was getting harder to walk. Sometimes I feared that my patients were not the only ones who were dying.

I gained a good twenty pounds during my hospice nights, a comfort-food layer of defense against the darkness. I would circle the Del Taco drive-thru or plant at the Claremont Village Grill counter regularly after death visits, less out of hunger and more out of late-night solidarity, just to encounter my brothers and sisters of the moonlight, anyone who was awake in those lonely hours while the world slept tight. My schedule and work were further straining a marriage that was slowly falling apart. I would stagger home at nine in the morning after an all-night bender of death visits, curl into the fetal position on my olive-green couch, and fitfully sleep through episodes of *Rick Steves’ Europe* until dinnertime, not wanting to talk to anyone, dreaming of being anywhere else in the world other than here.



While almost everywhere sounded better than my place of captivity, I was dreaming of a promised land, where the wine flows, the mountains climb out of the sea, and to my knowledge at the time, no one dies. A hundred and fifty miles north of my couch, the Santa Ynez Valley stretched like an accordion from the 101 Freeway west toward the bracing Pacific and east toward Los Padres National Forest. It is

a fairytale world where pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon are practically neighbors, with only syrah in between. In the heart of Santa Barbara County, Santa Ynez is the first great wine region you come to when accelerating north out of LA, which I did often and with increasing speed after I first discovered it.

On the western outskirts of the Santa Ynez Valley is a coastal fog-bound town called Lompoc, which was founded in 1874, in a tantalizing irony, as a temperance colony. If you bought land in Lompoc back then, you signed a contract that declared, “No vinous, malt, spirituous, or other intoxicating liquors shall ever be manufactured or sold upon any portion of the ranchos purchased by this corporation.” The founding fathers of Lompoc kept the spirits at bay for twenty-five years, after which all its parched residents up and partied like it was 1899. Now Lompoc is home to some of the best pinot noir and chardonnay vineyards in the world.

Follow Route 246 east from Lompoc, and the average temperature climbs about a degree for every mile you travel away from the Pacific Ocean. Forty-five minutes later, you arrive at the eastern flank of Santa Ynez, to a sunbaked land called Happy Canyon, so named because during Prohibition this was where the moonshine was run. “I’m takin’ a trip up Happy Canyon,” you’d say in Santa Barbara in the Roaring ’20s when you were on the hunt for bootlegged hooch. The name stuck, and the canyon is still a happy one, as now kingly Arabian horses run free and thirsty visitors find the most prized sauvignon blanc vineyards on the California Central Coast and some upstart cabernet. In France, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon have to be planted an entire country apart in order to find the right climates for their flourishing. In the Santa Ynez Valley, pinot and cab are planted twenty-five miles apart.

As I struggled through my hospice nights, I couldn’t stop thinking about Santa Ynez—this strange and beautiful valley stretched between a dry town and a wet canyon, a cool maritime climate

giving way to its hot inland neighbor, that felt like my elusive promised land but somehow also like a timeline, etched in dirt and written in skies, of my life and spiritual wanderings. Somehow in that valley those fiery, teetotaling Southern Baptists who gave me faith are squared off in perpetual conversation with the Episcopalians who pour me the sacrament these days—and keep buying me drinks.

Some time ago, I left hospice and moved to the Santa Ynez Valley. Now I work in wine. This has been far from a straight trip up Happy Canyon, believe me. Recently, a nosy woman on a wine tour I led peppered me with personal questions all afternoon, and at the end of the day she concluded, “Adam, your story is exhausting!” Tell me about it. This is the corkscrewing tale of how I got to Santa Ynez, eventually, and the questions that came up along the way. You and I are going to take a long wine tour together on our way there, and we will make plenty of stops for a glass and some local wine history. As you will see, I reached into the old, old story of wine in order to find my new story, which begins, as so many wine love stories do, in the French countryside.

Most stories about religion and drink are stories of recovery. I’m not sure if mine isn’t a story about recovery, too.



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