

# Oklahoma

## review

Neal Bonser

### The Beautiful Details of My Life

I'm probably going to come off like a class-A jerk, but this is really what happened. Tricia and I had been separated for six months. By that point she had already moved to Austin. She was living in a little boutique motel on South Congress. On Veterans' Day, which is also her birthday, she called me in Dallas and said she was going to kill herself. Now this wasn't the first time she'd made a suicide threat, but maybe because of her birthday and all, I took this one seriously. Here comes the part where I look like a jerk. I'd met Susan at my AA meetings and we'd gotten close really fast. She was at the house when Tricia called. In fact, Susan answered the phone the first two times. Both times Tricia hung up. After the second time Susan said, "It must be your wife." So I picked up the third time and sure enough it was Tricia.

Tricia knew the thing with Susan was happening before I did—like a variation on the self-fulfilling prophecy. She'd started in on me when I came home from one of the meetings.

"It's about time you got home, Tom," she had said.

I knew something was up. Her hair was pulled back so hard into a ponytail that her laugh lines were all smoothed out.

"I was at a meeting," I told her.

Neal Bonser

She did this thing she does with her mouth, not quite a frown. "You mean you were out drinking with Susan. This AA thing is just great. 'Meet a co-dependent and cheat on your wife.' Is that one of the twelve steps?"

"It's not like that," I said.

"Are you saying you weren't drinking?"

"We weren't drinking. We talked. She's having a hard time."

"And we're not?"

She was right about our marriage, but she wasn't right at the time about Susan and me. We started the affair—and the drinking—about a week later. We were sitting on a curb, virtually across the street from her boyfriend's house. We were friends. We had been supporting each other. But an attraction had been there from the beginning. One minute we were talking about her neighbors—how so-and-so lived in that house, and how so-and-so, "she's just so sweet," lived in that house—and then the next thing I knew my face was buried in her dark, tangled hair. I was breathing hot air on her neck. She whispered, "Oh my God, baby," in my ear and then it was all over. We lost sobriety in tandem. Drinking and sleeping together just fit. Once you give in it's all down hill. It becomes like that first dip on a roller coaster. *Well, I drank last night, but I didn't even get all that drunk. I got really drunk last night, but I made it to work on time. Tricia pushed me right into Susan's arms.*

So I drove straight to Austin that same morning, and here comes another jerk part: I'd stopped in Waco for lunch and had a couple Jack and Cokes at the restaurant. And because I was nervous about seeing Tricia, when I got back on the road I started taking pulls from this nickel-plated flask I keep in the glove compartment. By the time I got to Austin I was pretty well getting on towards a full-blown bender. That's when I decided to stop at The Beach, a bar near the campus. It had been my hangout while I was failing Business Calculus and various other classes. The line of beer taps

## The Beautiful Details of My Life

and the stained, cement floors actually reminded me of some of the good stuff about Tricia. We'd met in college and spent many an hour on this particular bar's sunny deck. Even after we moved to Dallas, Tricia would want to head down to Austin any weekend we could get away. We would hang out at Lake Travis during the day and have dinner with friends at night.

I remember one trip. Tricia chattered nonstop the entire drive down. She was happy and that made me happy. As soon as we parked, she sprang out of the car running towards the lake, flailing her arms like she was twelve. I ran after her as fast as I could without spilling my beer, but before I caught up she'd just plunged into the lake fully clothed. She was giddy and screaming, "Come on! Come on! It feels great!" She looked fantastic out there with her blonde hair wild and dripping. She wore this long, flowing skirt that clung to her thighs, and she had on my Stones T-shirt, big red tongue wagging. It always looked better on her. I took the time to remove my shoes and roll up my jeans before wading out a ways, but that wasn't good enough.

"Come on, you big weenie!" she shouted.

She tried to tackle me but I stood firm shrugging her off again and again. Each time she'd lose her grip on my shoulders and splash down into the lake laughing and thrashing around. Then on like the third or fourth time, she gave up. I stood there in my dry clothes, sipping my beer, laughing along with her, and then suddenly she wasn't laughing anymore. She was furious. She started berating me for my lack of spontaneity. In an instant things went from pure joy to a major fight, and I really wasn't sure what I'd done wrong. I remember noticing my shoes, sitting there on the shore. I could have sworn they looked embarrassed.

So I was sitting there at my table at The Beach watching the ice cubes in my drink melt into nothing, thinking about how I always tried to do the

Neal Bonser

right thing. Too many options always led to trouble for me. I did better with specific instructions. Our first therapist gave instructions. He said stuff like, "take any suicide threat seriously," and "you push her away with your drinking, stop the drinking and the rest will work itself out in time." He was wrong about that last one. I stayed sober one time for a year and a half and the marriage was still a mess. I started saying things like, "You're treating emotional pain like it has a cure." And she'd say, "I don't even know what that means."

I suppose I didn't really either. I was trying lines I'd read on a suicide prevention website. Another one, "You have to remember that you don't feel better when you're dead; you don't feel anything," sounded ridiculous to me even as it was coming out of my mouth. I'd already tried the stuff about being selfish. We didn't have any kids so I couldn't throw that one in her face.

Tricia's call felt like instructions in reverse. "Don't come," she said. And so I came. Susan thought I was making a mistake.

"You can't rescue her, Tom," she'd said.

"You really think that's what I'm trying to do?"

"C'mon baby. That's what you've been trying to do since you met her."

"Like you would really know," I said. "There's no rescue. I just owe her something." And besides, I really thought I could still help.

I remember the day Tricia moved out. That's one day I didn't help at all. The apartment is first floor with a bay window and a built-in breakfast nook. A small patch of green Bermuda turf stands between our window and a little ribbon of sidewalk. The street is quite close. I only mention it, because that's where it all came to a head. I was sitting in the little booth, drinking coffee, staring out the window, when she slides in on the other side and slams down a piece of paper. It was a little note Susan had written. It said something about my butt, as I recall. Tricia had gone through the

pockets of my sport coat. "I was right all along! I knew it! I knew it!" she yelled.

Our neighbor, Joe, passed by walking his Pomeranian. He waved. He must have thought Tricia was waving hello. She always flailed her arms around when she got excited. I remember noticing all of the cars. The street was really busy for that time of day, and I kind of got lost in my own head for a minute. I know this sounds a little nuts, but the morning sun hit just perfect right then, right at that moment. It gave the reds and blues and golds of the passing cars a kind of brilliance. Little details, like hood ornaments and wheel covers and rear view mirrors, became beautiful for an instant. I'm not sure how long I stared out the window. Tricia took my silence for an admission of guilt, which I suppose it was. When I took out my flask to spike the coffee, well, that turned out to be a trigger. Next thing I knew she was packing.

I knew I should've been in the bedroom begging for forgiveness and all that. But I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I sat there sipping my Irish coffee thinking about what our second therapist had said. This guy actually had an M.D., which meant he could prescribe drugs, and for whatever reason he honed in on Tricia's issues rather than me and my drinking. He told her she showed signs of clinical depression and wrote her a prescription for Zoloft or something. Tricia quickly branded him a fool and didn't fill the prescription. We never saw him again.

I watched through the bay window as Tricia dragged her wheeled suitcase through the grass to her old, beat up Volvo, which she'd parked on the street. Her dramatic exit seemed designed for me to burst out the door and make things right, right there on that little patch of grass. But things weren't right. The suitcase fell over twice, until finally she just heaved it into the passenger side. She hesitated before pulling out. She adjusted her mirror and then appeared to be looking for something in the back seat. She

Neal Bonser

was giving me one last chance. I felt kind of relieved when she finally pulled away. The place was quiet, the traffic had let up. I stared out the window for most of the morning. Then I went and called Susan.

So by the time I got to South Congress, it's probably pretty easy to imagine the state I was in, I mean between the flask and the bar and all. I remember seeing the State Capitol building looming in my rear view mirror. It seemed like it was getting bigger rather than smaller as I got further from it. I started thinking about the time we went on a tour there. We'd lived in Austin for years, but it wasn't until one of our visits from Dallas that we decided to tour the Capitol building. The dome is designed acoustically such that you can hear somebody whispering in the foyer from three floors up. It seemed like some sort of irony could be found in that fact.

Anyway, the day we took that tour was the first time Tricia tried to kill herself. We'd fought about something. I think it was about that second therapist. I thought maybe we ought to keep seeing him. That night after I'd gone to bed, with a gesture that felt like her final point in the argument, she finally did fill that Zoloft prescription and then proceeded to wash down half the bottle with a bunch of Jack Daniels. I woke up at three in the morning to the sound of her vomiting in the bathroom of our motel room. I grabbed her and took her to the emergency room where they pumped her stomach. After an overnight stay, they gave me a lecture and they gave her a bunch of paperwork and the name of yet another therapist. I'm not sure why I got the lecture.

But anyway, as I'm driving down South Congress this guy started tailgating me—making me really nervous. I thought it might be an unmarked police car or something so I set the cruise control to three miles over the speed limit and concentrated on not weaving. I've always been a pretty good

## The Beautiful Details of My Life

drunk driver. I know how that sounds, but I don't get reckless like some people I know. Fifteen years without a serious accident.

I ended up going right past Tricia's motel because this guy's still on me, and I didn't want to do anything suspicious. When he finally turned, I had gone like six miles too far south. By the time I got back to the motel it was starting to get late. The sky had become a strange version of orange like it gets when there's a tornado warning, only there wasn't a cloud in the sky. When I pulled into the driveway, I saw the Volvo parked right outside her door so I knew she was home. They use real keys still at that motel, no electronic card things, and the door was unlocked. I knocked twice before opening it.

Right off I saw a table with a phone, a bottle of Jack Daniels, an empty orange pill bottle, and two plastic cups. One cup had a drip of whiskey in the bottom and the other was still wrapped in motel cellophane. Everything started to feel a little unreal, kind of slow motion. The room was big, and the whirling ceiling fan made me feel dizzy. The floor was shiny, with brown Saltillo tile, and across from the couch a little TV blared some talk show. Orange light sifted through some gaps in the curtains. I saw a queen-size bed across the way in the adjoining room, so I walked through the open double doors and saw Tricia to my right in the bathroom leaning over the tub.

I called out her name but she didn't move. She was splayed out over the edge like she'd had a change of heart and tried to vomit things up. I was very calm at first. I pulled her to the floor and placed her carefully on her back. She wasn't breathing. Her lips were blue. I'd heard something somewhere about how mouth-to-mouth really wasn't the thing anymore—compressions are what's important. So I dredged up my memory of high school health class, locked my elbows, and planted my palms between her breasts, one hand on the other. After a few tries at that, I remember I

Neal Bonser

started yelling her name like she was asleep or something. I kept yelling, getting angry at her, yelling, "Open your eyes! Open your eyes, Tricia!" And thinking how she'd really gone and done it, and, yes, I was pissed. As if she'd done it solely to get even with me. I put my cheek by her nose, checking for breathing. I got nothing. For some reason, I tried opening her mouth, maybe thinking she'd swallowed her tongue. Her cheek was moist and I thought for a second she was crying. But it was me, sobbing, getting her all wet.

I started with the compressions again, working more and more furiously at it until I felt something crack—her sternum or a rib or something. That cracking pushed a wave of nausea straight through me, and I retched into the tub.

I'm really not sure what I did next. I know I went to the phone and called 911. The lady was very calm—made me stay on the line until the ambulance came. I sat there listening to the 911-lady breathe. Every once in a while she'd say, "They're on the way, honey." She just kept saying that. After a minute I pulled the cellophane part way down the one cup. I started thinking about fingerprints, crime scene stuff. I used my shirttail to hold the bottle of Jack while I poured and grabbed the cup at the bottom where the cellophane still clung. I was stone sober by then—adrenaline I guess. I held the cup up and watched my hand shaking for a second before I downed it. A minute or so later, the EMT's showed up and then the police and then I was answering questions, lots of questions, like, Are you the husband? When did you last speak to her? Have you been drinking? How much? When did you find her? How long has she been unconscious? Were you fighting? Did you hit her?

They had me fill out some forms and told me to stay in town for a while. I gave them a friend's number and said I'd be staying with him. I watched them wheel her out and somebody told me they'd be taking her to

## The Beautiful Details of My Life

Breckinridge Hospital and did I need a ride? And then suddenly I was alone in her room. I poured myself another drink and then picked up the phone and called Susan. I stepped outside expecting the cops to be waiting, but nobody was around. I wasn't sure how long I'd been in that room, but it felt like the middle of the night. I drove straight back to Dallas.

When I walked in the front door of my apartment Susan ran up and hugged me. She was wearing that green mini-dress that makes me want to touch her hips. She was saying, "I'm so sorry, baby!" and "How are you?" and things like that. After a minute she said she'd been waiting up most of the night and wanted to go back to bed, and I said that sounded good to me. I went to the kitchen and poured us both a drink. I stood there for a little while before I realized I had finished off both drinks, so I poured two more and headed for the bedroom. When I got there, Susan was asleep. I went back to the kitchen and sat in the breakfast nook. The sun was coming up. I sat sipping at the two drinks for a long while. I started thinking that maybe I ought to be crying or something, that maybe something was broken in me. Tricia was dead and what was mostly on my mind was the police and skipping town and the trouble I might be in.

I'm not sure how long I sat there, but I was still staring out the window when Joe passed by walking his Pomeranian. I gave him a wave and watched that little dog pulling at the leash with a crazed kind of excitement. He had to be choking himself on that collar, sniffing and pulling, straining like something beautiful lay just two steps ahead, never really getting to whatever it was. The traffic picked up, the blues and reds and golds, but the colors weren't bright yet. The sun was still too low.

Copyright © 2007 *The Oklahoma Review*.