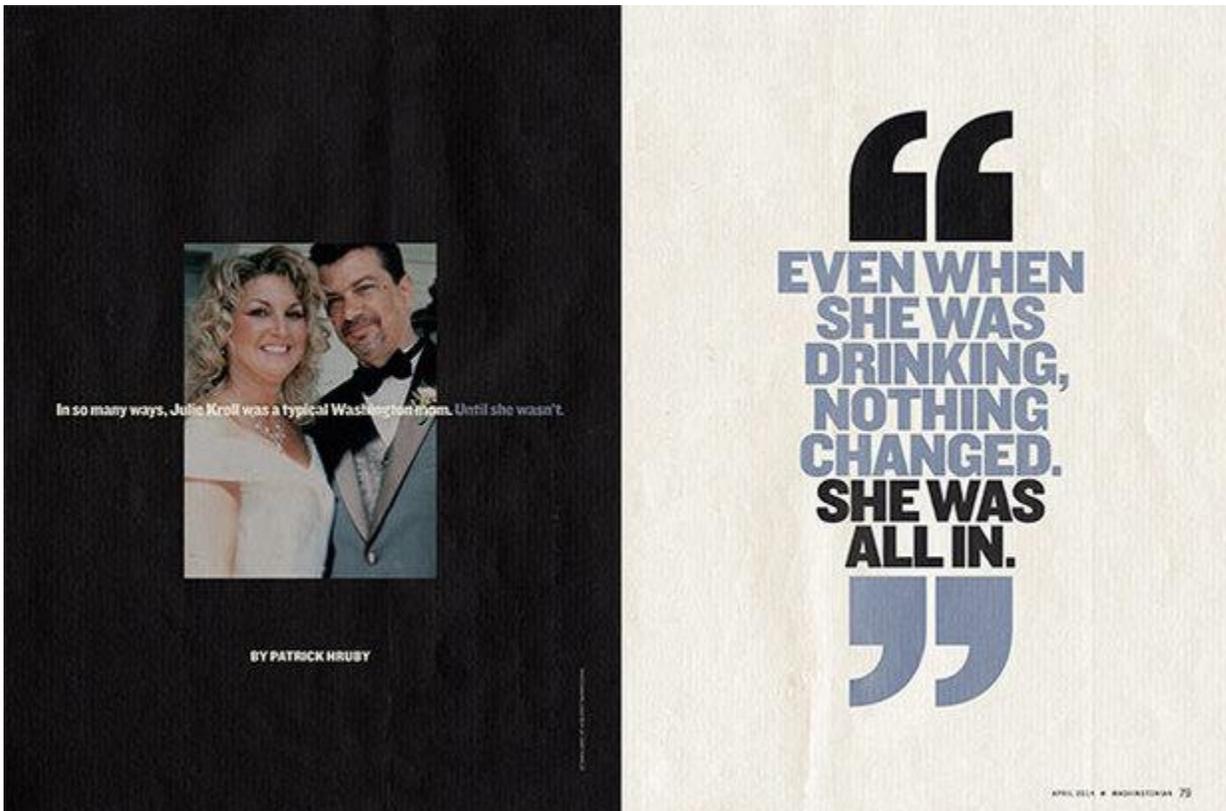


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“Even when she was drinking, nothing changed.”

In so many ways, Julie Kroll was a typical Washington mom. Until she wasn't. **By Patrick Hruby**



[Comments \(1\)](#) | Published April 2, 2014

Two weeks before she disappeared, Julie Kroll got a puppy. A Christmas gift for her daughter but also a gift for herself. Julie was a dog person. Always had been. She loved dogs unconditionally, the way they loved her, no matter how much she drank.

She had two dogs when she met her second husband, Jerry Hawley, in 2003 and later added two more, a beagle named Drew and a 140-pound St. Bernard named Sully. Active in animal rescue, Julie couldn't stand the thought of homeless dogs being abandoned, then euthanized, scared and alone. Unable to help herself, she fostered dozens over the years, stopping the car to hop out every time she saw a stray.

Sundays, Jerry recalls, were adoption days at their local PetSmart in Woodbridge—and if you saw Julie there, which was often, you’d never guess that police would later treat her like a fugitive, or that an online commenter would call her a useless piece of shit.

“I talked to Julie that morning,” says Mary George, Julie’s friend and addiction-support-group sponsor. “She sounded good. Strong. She seemed upbeat, had her day kind of planned out. She told me that she was going to the noon meeting.”

It was December 16, 2009. A Wednesday. A punishing blizzard was due that weekend. Julie’s mother and stepfather were flying in from California on Friday, ahead of the storm, visiting for the holidays. Julie was excited.

Nervous, too. She was 39 years old and trying to stay sober, going to support-group meetings and practicing what she’d learned in rehab, attempting to leave the rest behind. The blackouts and the Breathalyzers. The squad cars that sometimes had to park out front. Even so, there was shame. Guilt. A nagging fear she couldn’t shake. One wrong move and she could lose her job in sales for a senior assisted-living referral service, her home in Woodbridge, her only child. Her whole world, gone just like that.

It was enough to make anyone drink.

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Still, this was Christmas. And Julie was a pleaser, so everything had to look perfect. Be perfect, really, from the pine garlands running down her staircase to the beef stroganoff she made from scratch, Jerry’s favorite.

“The holidays were insane,” he says. “I called it the ‘white tornado.’ Lights out front, the whole house decorated, everything pristine. I was responsible for the outside. She was responsible for the inside. But she’d end up out there telling me how she wanted it done, get frustrated, then just do it herself.”

Jerry smiles.



“Even when she was drinking, nothing changed. She was all in.”

Around 2:30 pm that day, December 16, Jerry and Julie spoke on the phone. She sounded fine. Jerry was relieved—it was her 31st consecutive day of sobriety.

A month earlier, Julie had gone to pick her daughter up from school but instead disappeared, ignoring Jerry’s calls. Fearing the worst, Jerry contacted the police. An officer called Julie on her cell phone and told her to come home. She returned to the house drunk and belligerent, said she wanted to hurt herself, and kicked the officer. Police took Julie for an overnight psychiatric evaluation, and when they brought her home the next morning, she was as low as Jerry had ever seen her in their six years together.

Oh, my God, she told Mary afterward. Look at what I’ve done.

Later on the afternoon of December 16, after he and Julie had spoken and she sounded fine, Jerry’s phone rang again. It was Jim Patricio, Julie’s stepfather. There was a problem. He’d gotten a call from Julie’s eight-year-old daughter. Julie was drinking and driving, with the little girl in the car.

Jerry left work. He tried to call Julie’s cell phone, over and over. No answer. When he got home, a police officer was waiting outside their house.

Julie was missing.

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By the time Jerry arrived in Dale City, where Julie had vanished, the scene was deserted. From talking to police and Julie’s stepfather, Jim, this is what he knew: Julie picked up her daughter from school around 4 o’clock. She was drinking. She must have taken a wrong turn off Route 1, heading west instead of east, and ended up about five miles from home, near the 3300 block of Beaumont Road. Her daughter was talking on Julie’s cell phone to her grandparents. The car ended up hitting a tree at low speed and Julie eventually stumbled away, leaving her daughter with strangers, plus an open bottle of wine in the Isuzu Rodeo.

Julie’s daughter had been picked up by her first husband, the girl’s father. The Isuzu had been towed, and the neighbors who called Prince William County police had gone back inside. The officers who searched the area for Julie were long gone.

Shivering in the darkness, Jerry was alone. “The police only gave me an intersection,” he says. “I wasn’t exactly sure where Julie had crashed or what direction she had gone in or anything. I drove around for about an hour, got out a few places. There was no sign of her.”

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They had met at work. Julie had worked in sales for an office-supply company. Jerry had worked in operations for a rival. When the companies merged, the two began having lunch. Four years later, they were married. “I know it’s corny, but we used to be able to finish each other’s thoughts, sentences,” Jerry says. “We were best friends. We were good together.”

Julie grew up in Southern California, ten minutes from Disneyland. She loved the beach and the ocean, hiking and camping. She was an only child. Her stepfather was a high-school football coach. She was close to her mother, Cindy. The two talked on the phone every day, and if you saw them together, you might mistake them for sisters.

Julie played competitive softball, followed sports, and adopted the Redskins after moving to Northern Virginia. Sundays when they weren't at the PetSmart were for football: Julie and Jerry on the couch, watching games, Sully the St. Bernard sitting in Jerry's lap. She enjoyed cooking; Jerry liked to eat. "Julie was big into Mexican food," he says. "When she wasn't cooking, we had a couple of places we went to, probably once a week."

The couple traveled as much as they could, anywhere wet and warm. The Mayan Riviera. A cruise through the islands south of Puerto Rico. Weekend getaways to a bed-and-breakfast in St. Michaels.

"We didn't fight about anything," Jerry says.

A pause.

"Just her drinking."

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The day after Julie disappeared, Jerry went to the Garfield police station in Woodbridge. He wanted to file a missing-person report.

"They told me, 'No, you can't,'" Jerry says. "They said she didn't fit the criteria for a missing or endangered person," meaning she wasn't suspected of being kidnapped.

Julie had a rap sheet: three drunk-driving arrests in a year's time. In January 2007, she had struck both a guardrail and a Jersey barrier on I-95, totaling her Saab coupe and ending up in a hospital, strapped to a long spine board as a medical precaution but otherwise unharmed. Five months later, she was pulled over with rescue dogs in the back of her car and liquor on her breath. Seven months after that, she registered a blood alcohol level nearly double the legal limit during an early-afternoon traffic stop on a Tuesday.

This time around, Julie was driving her daughter without a valid license, and for that offense Prince William County police wanted to arrest her. They saw grounds to charge her with felony child neglect, driving on a revoked license, and driving with an open container of alcohol.

Jerry understood the criminal charges. Still, he was incredulous. And scared. He explained that Julie hadn't come home. That nobody knew where she was. That the night had been bitterly cold. That she never, ever would have abandoned her daughter and that something must have gone horribly wrong.

"I had to speak to the station commander before they would take my report," Jerry says. "The desk officer's attitude was that Julie was running from the law."

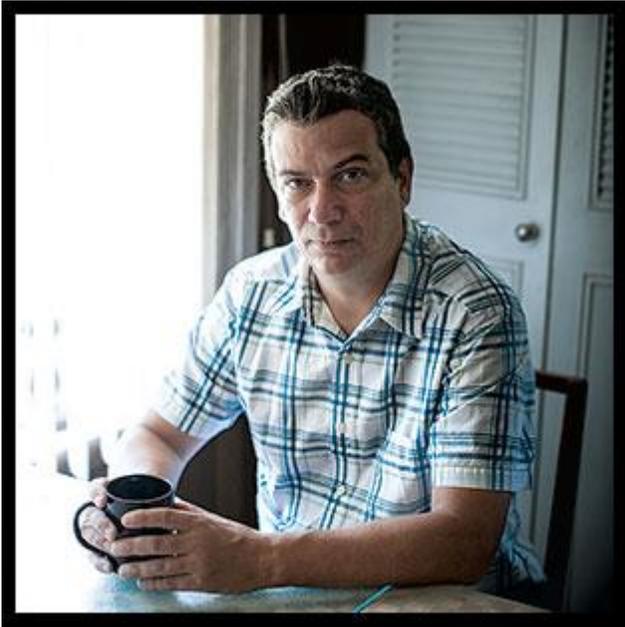
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Julie adored her daughter. Doted on the little girl the same way her mother had doted on her. "Julie was a hands-on mom," Mary says. "When you walked into their kitchen, it was all coloring and

schoolwork.” Soccer practice? Julie was there, from drop-off to pickup. Gymnastics? Ditto. Parents Day at the Montessori school? Julie would be on hand until the final bell.

Jerry was close to Julie’s daughter as well—yet never in the same way. “I was the play guy,” he says. “I taught her how to tie her shoes and ride a bike. We had a game: She would ride her bike, and I would have to be a cop and pull her over. It was always for speeding. She had a little electric Corvette, too, and she drove like a little maniac, all over the driveway and sidewalks.

“But she was a mommy’s girl. Wanted to spend all of her time with Mom. Julie would sleep with her—and if she didn’t, [the girl] would end up in our bed.”



A recovering alcoholic, Jerry Hawley, Julie’s husband, knew how hard it was to quit the bottle. Sober for 31 days when she disappeared, Julie had been expected at a support group that afternoon. Photograph by Daniel Bedell.

When did Julie’s drinking become abusive? Jerry can’t say exactly. Alcohol addiction is often a progressive disease, slow and insidious. The only real Rubicon is the next drink. One moment does stand out in his memory: In August 2006, Julie stopped at a Mexican restaurant, ostensibly to pick up food. Walking back to her car, she fell in the parking lot. Police charged her with public intoxication, and Jerry had to bail her out of a Manassas jail. “At that point, I knew there was a problem for sure,” Jerry says. “I had kind of known before. Denial is part of the disease.”

Jerry knew denial. He was in recovery himself, had been for two decades. The Falls Church native started drinking when he was eight, and it made him feel invincible. Better still, it helped him dull the pain. His mother, who raised Jerry on her own, had cancer. She died when he was a high-school sophomore. In his late teens and early twenties, Jerry used drugs, became physically dependent on alcohol, bounced in and out of support-group meetings. One day, he did so much cocaine that his heart stopped. Another time, he ended up in Fairfax Hospital with alcohol poisoning. Don’t drink for 72 hours, doctors told him.

“I stopped and got a drink on the way home,” Jerry says. “Somehow, I never got a DUI.” He became isolated, surly, “a real pain in the ass.” After breaking up with a girlfriend, he tried to kill himself and ended up in a mental hospital. He was 26. He’s been sober ever since.

“I hate using this word, but I was functionally drunk,” says Jerry, now 50. “I was drinking all the time. Every day. Julie was different. More of a binge drinker. A binge drinker will be okay for a week or so, then be drunk for two days in a row.”

Julie started as a wine drinker. She would climb into her daughter’s bed, wait for the little girl to fall asleep, then pour a glass. Something to take the edge off, just like so many other moms—harried multitaskers and strivers trying to ace the presentation, shuttle the kids to lacrosse, make time for hot yoga, remember to call the electrician. Women attempting to have it all, and all that comes with having it.

Over time, Julie added vodka to her routine. Similarly, she went from asking Jerry to be her designated driver to driving drunk. Sometimes, Jerry says, he would hide her car keys. Julie drank alone, at all hours of the day. She’d black out. Once intoxicated, she became angry and aggressive, downright mean.

Eventually, she got drunk with her daughter in the house—breaking a sacrosanct rule she had set for herself and leaving Jerry to take the little girl to the movies or to take Mom’s place in her bed. “She didn’t like that because I snored,” Jerry says. “But I would do my best to get her away when Julie slipped up.”

The slip-ups were a source of constant stress, physical and psychological. Athletic when sober, Julie was exceptionally clumsy when intoxicated. “She would fall down, stagger, stumble,” Jerry says. “She was a mess, more than I’ve seen in other people.”

Julie took pride in being a mother—in being a perfect mother, whatever that meant. Yet the more she drank, the more she felt like a failure. Like she was letting her daughter down. Which in turn made her want to be a better mother still.

“Julie was afraid of losing her,” Jerry says.

“That was her worst fear,” says Mary.

On the weekends when Julie’s ex-husband had custody of their daughter, Jerry recalls, Julie would often be drunk by Friday afternoon, right around the time her ex would pick the girl up from school. Julie would stay that way until Sunday morning.

Says Jerry: “I think she drank to get numb.”

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Five days after Julie went missing, Mary and Julie’s stepfather met in the parking lot of a Woodbridge Kmart, amid icy piles of plowed, dirty slush. The blizzard had packed a punch: 16 inches of wet, heavy snow at Reagan National Airport. Almost two feet in the suburbs. One of the area’s larger winter storms in decades.

Julie’s parents had arrived on Friday night. The bad weather had hit Saturday. The next day, Mary returned from a trip to Florida. She called Julie’s phone. An unfamiliar voice answered.

This is Cindy. Julie’s mother. Who’s this?

Mary. I’m Julie’s sponsor.

Mary heard worry in Cindy's voice.

Julie's not home. I'll let you talk to Jim.

Julie's stepfather explained the situation: How Julie was missing. How the police initially seemed indifferent, at least from Jerry's perspective, and were now preoccupied with the storm's aftermath. How he and his wife were still in shock, Jerry frantic.

Mary wanted to see the neighborhood where Julie had disappeared and asked Jim to meet her at the Kmart.

She greeted him with a hug, and he began to sob on her shoulder.

I know she's not with us anymore, Mary.

Mary loved Julie like a sister. A daughter, even. They'd met in a support group, where Julie had asked Mary to be her sponsor, a kind of sobriety mentor. Mary had struggled with alcohol and drugs herself—in her teens, her twenties, and again in her forties, when as a mother she saw a decade of sobriety nearly derailed by a prescription-drug addiction and a 30-day stint behind bars. Mary could relate to the lying, the fear of getting caught, the need for escape, the not wanting to ask for help because then the whole world would know just how rotten things really were. How rotten you were. She knew how much it hurt to frighten and betray your friends and family, to make your own daughter feel afraid to say *I love you*. She knew that sobriety was a dull, daily grind, a marathon without a finish line.

"Mary was the first sponsor that Julie really trusted," Jerry says.

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Women become addicted to alcohol more quickly than men, because of physiological differences, yet according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, women who abuse liquor are more likely than men to have family and friends resist their getting treatment. "If you have cancer, you get 10,000 people marching for you wearing pink ribbons," says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a Washington psychotherapist who specializes in addiction treatment. "With this disease, people shun you." No one wants to be labeled the bad wife, or worse, the bad mother.

Julie sought help. She saw an addiction counselor. And after her second DUI in 2007, she spent a month at a treatment facility in Wilmington, North Carolina. Her parents were supportive and flew out to help Jerry care for her daughter. In 2008, the terms of her probation after her third DUI required her to randomly blow into a Breathalyzer at home. One of those times, Julie drank. The machine flashed a red light, and she was jailed for the summer.

For Mary, incarceration had been a turning point. From the top bunk of a holding-cell bed, she began the process of forgiving herself. Not so for Julie.

"I think jail was horrible for her," Mary says. "Devastating. Traumatic. A nice girl in a place like that? She didn't think that would ever happen to her. She felt like a marked woman. Like she had destroyed trust. Helpless."

Jail scared Julie. But her sobriety didn't last. She was caught in an emotional spin cycle, every relapse freighted with shame and guilt and stirring up an anxious voice inside: *You're not good enough*.

You're failing. You fooled all of them, but you're not fooling me. If you were good enough, you wouldn't need this drink. A drink quieted the voice, which then got louder until the next drink. Confiding in Mary was different. Safe. Mary didn't judge; no matter how low Julie felt, Mary had felt the same. Maybe even lower. They had a routine. When Julie needed to talk, she would call. And when Julie needed a drink, she would call. Of course, those times were one and the same. Mary would listen, walk her through the moment, be a red light for the cravings: *One is too many and a thousand isn't enough. Go take a bubble bath. Pick up some flowers for yourself on the way home. Stop worrying about everyone else. Be gentle with yourself. Let some things go. Being happy doesn't mean being perfect.*

"I think she was forgiving herself more, lightening the load," Mary says. In the summer of 2009, Julie had started a new job. She seemed sunnier, less somber. During support-group meetings, she spent less time looking at the floor and more time looking people in the eyes. "Her relationship with her daughter and Jerry was better," Mary says. "I think she was starting to blossom."

She sighs. "But it's hard. Getting sober is a roller coaster."

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Outside the Kmart, Mary told Jim she would do anything she could to find Julie. The two drove to the scene of the accident, knocked on doors, and found an eyewitness: a local woman named Donna Smith, who along with her adult son Ray Messenger had watched Julie vanish.

Between speaking with Donna and police accounts, Mary pieced together a more complete picture of what had happened: After getting lost on the opposite side of I-95 from her home, Julie stopped her Isuzu on Beaumont Road in Dale City. Her daughter, told to seek help, hopped out of the car to knock on the door of a nearby house. Julie followed, leaving the car in gear. It rolled downhill and struck a small dogwood tree.

Watching the odd scene unfold from her house across the street, Donna called the police. Outside, Ray and a friend tried to comfort Julie's daughter, giving her a cookie. Meanwhile, Julie walked back to the Isuzu and backed it away from the tree. She exited the car, lurching. She passed under a streetlight. And then she was gone.

"I told the police, 'It's so cold out here—we need to find her,'" Donna says. She'd seen that Julie was hardly dressed for the weather, in a cotton shirt and a thin-looking vest. As Donna recalls, a female officer responded, "Well, if she wasn't drinking, she wouldn't be in this situation."

"And then I told her, 'But it's cold out here. She doesn't have a coat on,'" Donna says. "And they said, 'She probably called a friend to pick her up.'"

Donna was upset. "Her purse and her cell phone and everything was in her car. So she can't call nobody," she says. "They got in their cars, drove once around the neighborhood. They didn't see her."

According to Sergeant Kim Chinn, a spokeswoman for the Prince William County police department, officers searched the area that night. "She clearly had a reason to run from the police," Chinn says. "You have to understand what the officers were thinking at the time was that she was running away and hiding from us."

For days afterward, Mary, Jerry, Julie's parents, and even Donna's family searched the snow-covered area—alerting neighbors, checking back-yard sheds, several times entering abandoned houses. Nothing. "People on the block where Julie disappeared who were in their houses that night had no idea what had happened," Mary says. "They heard it from us."

On Christmas Eve, Mary and a friend named Robin spent the day handing out flyers featuring Julie's picture to drivers along Beaumont Road. They reached the bottom of a small hill, near the last place Julie had been seen. To their left, past the sidewalk and at the bottom of a steep slope, surrounded by trees and snow drifts, was a creek.

You go left, Mary said, and I'll go right.

Mary, I don't have my boots on, Robin said. The snow is too deep.

The two turned back, went to a nearby church, and prayed. A little after midnight, they stopped by the Garfield police station. There was a rumor: An anonymous woman with blond hair had been arrested, just a few hours ago. Mary was hopeful. Maybe it was Julie. Maybe she was so scared of the police that she wouldn't give her real name.

"Nobody had been arrested," Mary says. "It was so disheartening."

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"You have to come home right now." The call came from Mary, a few minutes after noon.

It was December 29, a Tuesday. Thirteen days after Julie had gone missing. Twelve days after Jerry had filed a missing-person report. Ten days after the blizzard. Eight days after Jim and Mary's meeting in the parking lot. One day after Prince William police issued a Crime Solvers news release about the case, which included a mug shot of Julie and carried the headline wanted. One day, also, after a fed-up Mary had contacted Congressman Gerry Connolly and Prince William County supervisors Frank Principi and John Jenkins.

Early that Tuesday morning, December 29, police conducted an on-foot search of the area where Julie was last seen staggering away, something Jerry and Mary had wanted them to do for nearly two weeks.

"It didn't have to be done that way," Mary says. "Why did it take 13 days?"

Says Sergeant Kim Chinn, the Prince William County police spokeswoman: "We couldn't search before because everything had been covered with snow. There had been a blizzard and a snowfall. Once the snow melted, we looked for her."

Jerry was in a meeting when Mary's call appeared on his phone. But he knew. Knew before he stepped outside to take the call. "They found her," Mary said.

Julie Kroll died alone. Police found her body in the creek, the same creek Mary and her friend Robin had eyed eight days earlier, down the street from Donna's house, 300 yards from where Julie left her car.

A medical examiner listed her cause of death as "blunt impact injury of torso," with "acute alcohol intoxication and exposure to cold environment" as contributing conditions.

In short: Julie was drunk. She fell. She was hurt. She froze.



A blizzard came shortly after Julie disappeared, hampering search efforts. Had someone combed this creek 300 yards from her abandoned car, things might have worked out differently. Photograph by Dan Chung.

After speaking with Mary, Jerry went home. Together with Cindy, he had to tell Julie's daughter: *Mommy's gone.*

"Of all of this, that was the hardest," he says. "The worst thing I've ever had to go through."

The little girl withdrew into grief. Jerry was inconsolable. For weeks, he tried to make sense of things. *How could she have walked away?* He knew that Julie was drunk and that drunk people made inexplicable choices. But maybe there was more to it. Julie, Jerry figured, must have been frightened. Terrified of going back to jail. Of losing custody. She had been driving without a license for more than a year, adamant about getting to work and picking up her daughter, about preserving some sense of independence and control—and with that, self-worth. Only now that would vanish. Julie would feel shame, and she would be judged.

The morning police found her body, an article about Julie's disappearance was published on Channel 9's website. The story found its way to an online message board, where many of the comments were downright vicious:

Maybe the useless piece of shit is dead.

Pfffffffffffftt. F---ing piss-tank.

Maybe while running from the scene of her drunken wreck, she managed to trip over a strategically placed boulder and careen headfirst down a ravine snapping her neck when she finally reached the bottom? Please?

Jerry's emotions ricocheted. He blamed the police for wanting to put Julie in jail. Blamed Julie's lawyers for keeping her out of jail. Blamed himself. He wondered if he had enabled her.

Jerry had told Julie not to drive. It worried him sick. *You know*, he would tell her, *this isn't going to end well*. There was no winning that argument, no drawing of boundaries that Julie would accept. Addicts, he knew, were stubborn. Jerry was sometimes frustrated: *I figured this out—why can't she?* He never lost hope she'd recover. "To me, she was sick. I took a vow that said 'in sickness and in health.'"

One day, a few months after Julie's death, Jerry called Mary. *Do you think Julie knew how much I loved her?*

"She knew," Mary says. "I know she knew."

Julie was loved. Did she love herself? She could have picked up the phone; instead she picked up a drink. Such is the cruel logic of addiction: At some point on the last afternoon of her life, Julie needed alcohol. More than anything else in the world. And the very weight of that need made her need it even more. On the last afternoon of her life, Jerry says, Julie never made it to her support-group meeting.

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Jerry holds out his phone and presses a button for his contacts. "This is full of people who understand," he says one day almost four years after Julie vanished.

Alcohol addiction is a disease of isolation. Of obsession and compulsion, withdrawal and piercing loneliness. "It's like the lights are slowly going out and you're in this bubble that is shrinking," Anita Gadhia-Smith says. "You end up trapped within yourself."

When Jerry left the mental hospital at age 26, he needed help. He received it from some of his coworkers, who happened to be members of an addiction support group. "They were always happy and joking around the office," Jerry says. "It used to really piss me off." And then? "They would show up at my house at meeting time and say, 'Shut up and get in the car.' Those guys kind of saved me."

At Jerry's first meeting, two of the older members placed wagers on how long he'd last before drinking again. Both bet less than a year. Loudly. Jerry was incensed. *No way I'm drinking*, he told himself. *I won't give them the satisfaction*.

Exactly a year later, Jerry collected a celebratory chip for staying sober. He turned to the two older members, waved the prize in their faces. "They were laughing their tails off at me," he says. "Since then, I've used the same trick on other people."

Does it work? "Yeah," he says, smiling.

Jerry lost his wife. His stepdaughter. His home. His life. The months after Julie's death were dark, almost hopeless. Enough to make anyone drink, or worse. But Jerry had help. He confided in Mary, and the two became close. Encouraged by his brother, he went back to school at Northern Virginia Community College and earned a degree in substance-abuse counseling. He also appeared in a film, *Lipstick & Liquor: Secrets in the Suburbs*, made by local documentary producer Lori Butterfield. Released in late 2012 and shown in Alexandria last spring with Jerry and Mary in attendance, the film tells Julie's story—Mary's, too—and the stories of other women who are mothers, sisters, wives, who all could have been Julie. A mother herself, Butterfield wanted to destigmatize addiction in women, show that treatment exists, and acceptance as well, that coming forward doesn't mean coming undone.

Julie's parents don't appear in *Lipstick & Liquor*. They didn't want the film made. Even now, they decline to talk about their daughter's death. Jerry understands. But he also has seen the e-mails Butterfield receives, expressing gratitude and hope:

I am a 53-year-old, stay-at-home-mom, recovering alcoholic and will be 3 years sober this coming September. I am so very grateful that this documentary has been made, so thank you!

I have lived in 5 different suburban neighborhoods in my 21 years of marriage. The issues of drinking and suburban women is long long long overdue. . . . I can guarantee that none of the women who "need this" will see it but . . . maybe someone close to them will.

I watched with my fiancé, we are both in recovery. While sad in some parts, I related to the entire film. Great job, thank you for all the work you did. May God bless all the women who got sober and Julie's family.

"That's the whole beauty of being sober," Jerry says. "You don't have to do any of this alone."

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Julie was buried in California along with the ashes of one of her dogs, a rescue named Baxter. There was a graveside memorial service. Friends and family attended. Her parents kept Cooper, the dog that was a Christmas gift. He's a golden retriever, same as Baxter.

"I've seen Cooper a couple of times, and it's weird," Jerry says. "He kind of has the spirit of Julie in him. Really friendly. He's a good boy."

Julie's daughter lives in Virginia with her biological father. She spends summers with her grandparents at their home in California. To this day, she insists that Cooper is her dog. He's a good boy. He follows her from room to room, like a puppy.

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