

I'm the guy who slept with cross-eyed Mary and must confess I was cross-eyed myself at the time. Somehow, our eyeballs synched up, bringing her right one square with my left, while her left eye was searching for my closed right eye. Fortunately, alcohol and lust have a way of ignoring reality and overlooking those delicate details that would never have happened with a clearer head. Without that, God would have put men and women on earth for no discernible reason. For the remainder of my life, I have admired Jethro Tull's song *Cross-Eyed Mary* on the subject.

It needs to be said, drunken relationships were fine at the moment; however, the morning light does have a way of bringing on headaches and regrets. Yet years later, I couldn't help but wonder how it might have worked out if I'd not been too full of myself to date a cross-eyed woman.

A true lover would have paid out for an eye operation or therapy to correct the woman's condition, making a gift to Mary instead of studying how her eyes stared opposite ways.

Me, I cut and ran. Not because I thought she was ugly. Not at all.

That woman remained no more or less beautiful than any other but for that one flaw, faultless as a woman except for her crossed eyes. So, astounded at my own behavior, I had to ask myself: *how sick are we as humans to be unable to ignore a harmless God-given trait?*

I was going to write, 'a God-given defect,' but who was so perfect that they could label someone else's features as defective? What looked beautiful to me may have been abhorrent to you.

Still, in fairness to me, most men would have scarpered when they woke to see a cross-eyed lover staring them in the face—or staring them half in the face, the other eye meandering up and down the wallpaper behind the bed or wherever the other eye happened to be gazing.

This whole topic stood as one of many dilemmas limiting me from being whole as a human.

In my head and heart, I knew what was right, what my folks had taught me about being a good person. I knew what the good book preached and what society dictated was the right path.

Yet looking around at my fellow man, I knew I wasn't as bad an example as many of the masses. Nothing was black and white, only degrees of self-deceit.

It all started to make sense when I found myself sitting here with a half-empty bottle of rum, and a completely empty liter of 7 Up. Clearly, I had little choice but to consume the rest of the rum straight, struggling to come to terms with being the man I knew I was these days.

One night, a woman asked my name, a perfectly normal incident, you may well think. But I was embarrassed, barely finding it within myself to tell her, Steve Hartshorn.

*Christ, I'm a shadow of myself now, no longer the man I knew.*

Now, I wondered if I could ever come back or if this would soon be the start of my path toward the end, heading down that slippery slope that only ended in one place, the graveyard. It seemed impossible to have found myself at this place in life. How had it come to be?

Blessed with an incredibly strong body and a good upbringing, failure had never been worth thinking about—it hadn't been on my radar, couldn't happen to me. Simply impossible.

My perfect childhood had never prepared me for anything less than success.

Even way back in little league, I could connect with the ball and drive it into the outfield at every bat. Then later, standing a whole foot taller than any of my classmates in grade school, Steve permanently endured as the first one picked when we chose sides, and I kept the bullies from picking on innocent kids destined to grow up as accountants and engineers.

I never saw geeks or oddballs, only good kids getting ruined by ball-busting knuckleheads.

So, grade school was simple to me, high school as well, all a breeze, a doddle, a walk in the park, and like taking candy from a baby. All those crass sayings—they all depicted me, Steve

Hartshorn. Big Steve, the one who could turn his hand to most sports, having a knack for basketball, baseball, and football, being gifted with height, weight and balance among other assets.

When the scouts came around, they also assured me that football was my strong suit—even though later, in self-imposed exile from the United States, I would hold a total hatred for the game. My inner damnation became so bad, it had me drinking rum and beer back in my childhood paradise of the Dominican Republic.

Back then, the possibility of putting the wrong foot forward couldn't prevent me from excelling at everything. Abruptly, it seemed a world away, as if I had been a whole different person in those days. It had only been two years since I'd been a star quarterback at the University of New Mexico, the idol of the Lobo Nation. Now, nothing more than a bum, wondering how one single paltry blow to a knee could have rendered me this useless.

That hit had been vicious, one defender high and one low, sending me to the ground helpless and in shock, writhing, clutching a leg. Reality returned with a vengeance the next day.

That's how the old saying goes, isn't it? *Pride comes before a fall.*

Not that I ever had been that proud about anything in my life, but it showed how I should've stayed grounded, should have seen my downfall on its way. Shouldn't have been so cocky, should I?

It came down to what they say about the good old benefit of hindsight.

Seven doctors examined me in the end. Wasn't seven supposed to be a lucky number? In my case, it wasn't, since they all said the same, that football was no longer going to be a possibility. I would remain knackered, done in. They pronounced it as if I was an old horse carted off to the dog meat processing plant.

"Why not be happy you can limp around and aren't in a wheelchair. There are many folks a lot worse off than you, you know. You've had your chances in life. Consider yourself lucky." I would have to accept my lot, get used to sitting around at home or maybe, in time, find myself another job, something to do sitting down. A teller. An accountant. An admin person.

Those thoughts alone made me shudder, made me want to dash away and throw up.

*Lucky, my ass.* What did they know about luck?

"Fuck lucky." Talking through their backsides, they were.

So, determined to prove them wrong, I went on to four more doctors before resigning myself to the end of my football career that hadn't really got off the ground yet anyway.

However, I never resigned myself to the end of it in my brain, did I? No, I only listened to it, heard people saying it over and over, those know-it-alls. Those little shits. Those godawful bastards, coming along like that to rob me of my nice life as I had known it back then.

No. Instead, alcohol and denial became my new friends. I would be fine, I told myself, fine sitting at home for a while, and in time, I'd think of a new life, a new thing to do for a living.

Home for me right now was the Dominican Republic, the place where I'd been growing up from the age of ten. Rum remained readily available and dirt cheap as well as Cerveza Presidente.

You could say I'd been whoring around to keep my ego intact but almost always awoke with a hangover. After a while, my money grew thin, and my brain grew bored of the same four walls. So, I found a job—well, not so much found but created, hiring myself out with a couple shady characters. Easy job, they said. Money for nothing.

All it needed was for me to deliver money to New York and bring even more back. The cost of living in my country was minimal and these jobs kept me in rum and beer.

Hideaway motels became my sleeping places, dodgy spots where the locals went to cheat on their wives or to hire themselves a half hour of pleasure with a woman of ill repute.

But I had nothing to complain about, having been given a monthly rate which satisfied both me and the owner. The north shore of the Dominican Republic gradually became my adopted area.

Once you settled in any place, it wouldn't be long before the whole community came to accept you as a local. Dominicans, in any case, had an uncomplicated way of adopting strangers, bringing newcomers into their fold. I had a tough time keeping to myself after the locals adopted me.

The kids followed me around because of my massive size and unusual mastery of their language. The grandmas accepted me as a potential spouse for their daughters, and the ladies defied the coyness of the *Señorita* tradition, duly coming on to me in droves.

If I had remained much longer, a drunken night might have had me married without my intention. And to be frank, if I continued drinking the way I had been doing, then I probably wouldn't have noticed if someone had slipped a wedding band onto my finger and dragged me to church.

Only one thing kept me from straying too far from the straight and narrow.

Truth being, I was in love with Marie Fredrickson back in Albuquerque. The sad news?

My best friend, confidant and soul brother was already married to her.

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Perhaps I needed another two-dollar bottle of rum before bedtime.

Thanks to Leo Kottke's *I'm the Guy That Didn't Marry Pamela Brown*, Marie stayed my Pamela. But you see, she was perfect, always had been in my eyes, yet I forced her onto my best friend.

And bugger me, they went off and got wed, something never in my plan.

Even worse, *happily* married besides. So, change those lyrics slightly and I was the guy who should have married Pamela Brown instead of Abe Schaeffer. I'm the guy who'd screwed up.

Eventually, even a perfect island full of award-winning beaches and God-driven sunsets began to shrink and become commonplace and dull. Nights of drunken debauchery and meaningless trysts would all blur together and one day, you'd find yourself sitting at sundown taking measure of yourself, wondering how it all had come to this. In my case, that happened on a fishing dock in Monte Christi, both legs dangling in the warm saltwater while tiny bait fish nibbled at my feet.

The yellow moon fought its way into the sky being abandoned by the sun.

At such a moment, life makes it easy to feel tiny in such a large universe.

That day, the soft waves swished on the shore in a gentle rhythm with the moored boats singing a low mournful tune as they rubbed the used tires.

I took a breath from self-pity long enough to realize I was no one special.

I'd had a good run but now at twenty-three, wasn't it a tad early to be giving up on life? Granted, the rum had enabled me but now I needed to seek some reality.

Football and my dreams of grandeur were precisely that, my past. One last night of senseless drinking and carousing, dancing a few merengues and I would be headed to the airport in Puerto Plata to use the other half of my ticket that brought me here.

My mind, took me back to my adopted home, Albuquerque New Mexico.