

'I woke beside a dumpster. I'd no idea how I got there. It was a sobering experience'

by **Caroline O'Doherty**

IT was around this time two years ago that John Leonard awoke with his back on fire and began to think seriously about giving up drink.

He had been downing whiskeys on his own in a bar on the anniversary of his father's death when a similarly bereaved friend joined him but declined a drink because he was driving.

"I got him a drink anyway and when he said, I'm not drinking that, I said well if you're not drinking with me you might as well fuck off. He took me at my word and stood up to go, so I kicked him in the nuts. I woke up the next morning in a laneway beside a rubbish dumpster. I'd no idea how I got there. I'd lost my phone and wallet, my shirt was half way over my head and my back was covered in 60 or 70 mosquito bites. It was a really sobering experience," he says.

In fact, there'd been many similar experiences in his 15-year drinking career. Not all of them were so dramatic as to involve blood-sucking insects but many did feature John acting the maggot, hurting others, hurting

himself and not being able to tell where the fun ended and the fracas began, usually because he couldn't remember the latter part of the process.

But drink was such an intrinsic part of his life and, he thought, his personality, that he couldn't quite imagine an existence without it.

"I was a wanker, but proud of it. My mates faced a constant stream of expletives and ridicule when they refused to go on marathon drinking sessions with me any day of the week. I would call them just to question the status of their birth-right and their sexuality."

That was when he was Drunken Lenny. Now that he's The Sober Paddy, he has a different take on life and advises people who encounter carbon copies of his former self while trying to give up drink to practice a few robust retorts. A sample from his 'how to' guide: "I find saying things like 'Your mother doesn't mind when I'm not drinking' is a great way to shut people up."

The Sober Paddy is the nom de plume he uses for his blog (www.soberpaddy.com) which is sub-titled "Drinking, abstinence and the world in between", an apt description of his collection of stories, (often comic) musings and advice that chronicle his last year and four months of sobriety and all that went before.

It serves a dual purpose for the 34-year-old from Dublin who has a degree in English and philosophy from UCD and always intended becoming a writer.

Bar work, drinking and GAA — he was Dublin's reserve goalkeeper and key to the county's win in the 2008 O'Byrne Cup final — got in the way, however, so he's only now dusting off that ambition. The blog allows him exercise his creative talents while at the same time providing help.

"I wanted to give up for a while but I wasn't too sure how to go about it," he says now from his new home in the beachside Sydney suburb of Bondi where he still,

believe it or not, runs a bar — the source of several good yarns for his blog.

"Being Irish you never want to admit that you have a problem drinking — especially if you enjoy drinking which I did.

"I didn't want to go to AA. I know some people who love it but my problem was the 12 steps (the AA recovery programme) and its acceptance of a higher power.

"For me that's untenable because I believe we are in control of whatever we do so for me to have to give up my control of myself to something else — be it alcohol or god — wouldn't work.

"I also didn't want to call myself an alcoholic. Even though I suppose that's what I am, I didn't want to get into all of that. I just wanted to stop. I'm lucky in that I had the support from my wife and I had good friends so if I can give a bit of support through the website, great."

Some support comes in the form of practical suggestions — how to explain why you're not drinking, how to fool people you are still drinking, how to attend weddings and other traditional drinking frenzies and not fall off the wagon.

But he does broach the serious stuff about getting your head in the right place, re-evaluating friendships and rediscovering the person behind the drinker.

"It's difficult for the Irish abroad too. There is this idea that the Irish are great drinkers and that we need to live up to that image.

"My experience is we're terrible drinkers. We spend a lot of the time in fights, getting sick and ruining relationships.

"There is definitely a gap in the market for a support system for people who want to give up drinking."

Others are trying to fill that gap too. John is a fan of Aussie site www.hellosundaymorning.com.au, which encourages people to give up drink for three months and share their experiences, hiccups and all.



John Leonard: Blog offers advice on how to quit the demon drink.

Paddy's blog

Extract from blog of
SoberPaddy.com
**I'm talkin' 'bout money,
money**
January 25

I'VE been thinking a little bit about the cold hard cash that turns the brains of this world. I'm not going to launch into some tree-hugging, leftist idealism about the nature of happiness but I must state that we all need a little bit of money. Everyone needs money. Barter can't work for a planet that functions as massively as our little blob of blue and green. It's just not possible.

Let's also face the reality that we are all at some level, intoxicated by the idea of having a limitless purse. What would you do if you won the lottery? If you had fifty million lying around, what would you buy? Well, if you had \$200,000 sitting looking at you, what would you get into your possession? Two hundred grand is a nice sum. You could buy a house, not a big one or a mansion in the suburbs, but a house nonetheless.

For around two hundred grand you could buy a picturesque three-bedroom semi-detached house in the lovely town of Mallow in Co Cork. You would have to live in Cork, but that's another matter completely.

For your \$200k you could spend a few weeks mulling over the latest edition of luxury cars monthly. You could visit showrooms with the confident swagger of someone who could buy an Aston Martin or Ferrari. You would have to feed the beast and protect it and polish it every few days, but no one could tell you when to drive it or when to just sit staring at it for days.

Personally I would have to go for an Aston Martin DB One. I have seen prices for these quoted around \$200,000. Through the rose tinted glasses I am wearing now, the salesman would be so hard up for the moolah, that he'd be willing to strike any deal he could. I would spend a few weeks toying with his dignity before he'd finally succumb and hand over the keys for a miserly \$169k, leaving me with over \$30k to mess around with.

By messing around I mean blowing it on an outrageous holiday to Vegas. I think about this day, I really do, and it excites me.

So here's the deal. I have been doing some planning and saving since I have been sober. I have worked out that because of my lack of drinking and heavy drunken social interaction, that I am saving \$250 per week. It's a simple piece of maths and it has allowed me to go on holidays for three weeks to Ireland, two weeks in Thailand, 10 days in New Zealand, twice to Melbourne and twice to the Gold Coast over the last year. I have saved over \$1k a month and it has allowed me the freedom to roam the world.

I have done a very, very simple calculation and have simply multiplied that \$250 by the number of years I drank (15), by the number of weeks in a year (52). The resulting total is \$195,000. This is the safe estimate for what I have spent on boozing and messing around over the years. It's a big number when you sit staring at it. It's a massive number — hard currency, not a credit limit.

This has lightened my spirits in a way as I am looking forward to owning my first Aston Martin when I am 48, right in the tumultuous whirl of a mid-to late-life crisis. Vroom vroom.

Now in reality I don't regret a thing. Life is a journey and all that. But it has given me food for thought. When you drink you spend all your money. There is a constant battle to stay ahead and unless you are earning a huge amount over the average industrial wage, then it will remain like this as you go onward in life. Change is something which you can accept, reject or throw yourself into with abandon. If you make a decision now, you can bet your bottom dollar that it will have an effect at some stage further down the line.

If you ever needed motivation to give up the jar then surely this could be it. Think of the bulging wallet and let nature take its course.