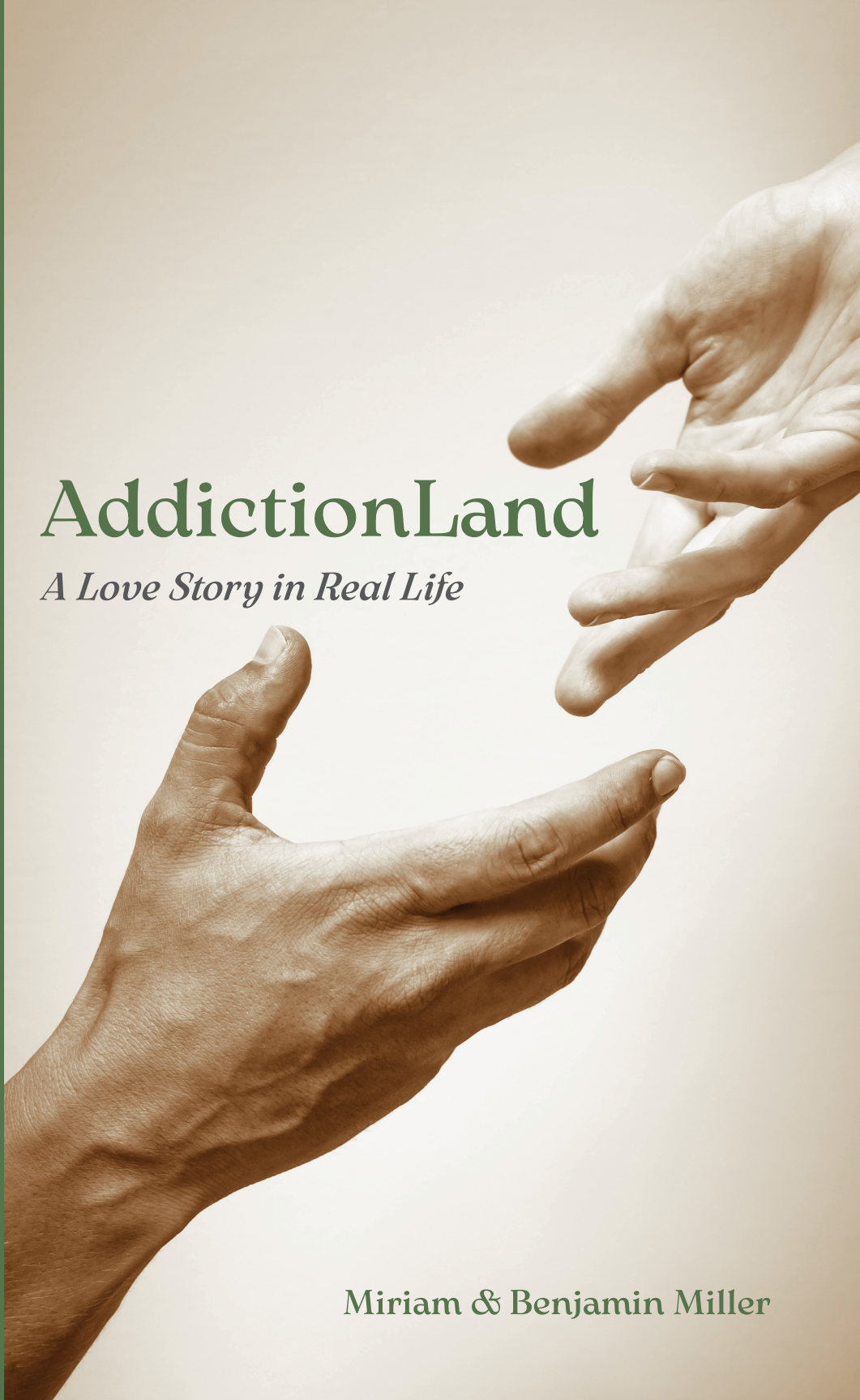


A photograph of two hands, one from the bottom left and one from the top right, reaching towards each other in a gesture of connection or support. The hands are light-skinned and the background is a soft, warm beige. A solid green vertical bar runs along the left edge of the cover.

AddictionLand

A Love Story in Real Life

Miriam & Benjamin Miller



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D-Day Minus 1

February 12

Mimi

My husband moves around our bedroom packing his bag — just the basics: jeans, sweatshirts, a toothbrush, shaving kit. No razor, though. They don't allow them. The bag looks too small for a thirty-day stay, but maybe that's because we've already spent so long carrying everything that won't fit inside.

He turns, sees me watching from the little loft space that sits outside of our room. He shifts his weight from foot to foot, eyes on the floor. We've said most of what we're going to say, but the silence still hums with the things we haven't.

Behind me, our three-year-old daughter is perched on the floor with a fistful of crayons and a stack of printer paper. She's drawing a horse family—a mother, a baby, and what she says is the “daddy horse who's going away but will be back.” She says it like she understands more than she should. Like maybe she's been listening to us from the hallway all along.

“Mommy, look at this one,” she says, holding up her drawing. I lean over, offer a quiet “Wow, sweetie,” and try to make my face match the words. I want her to feel heard. I want her to know she matters. Everything she says feels important—and it is—but I am preoccupied. My thoughts are spinning in a dozen directions, none of them helpful.

I came to the computer thinking that writing might bring some clarity. But now that I'm sitting here, my mind is blank. My head remains full.

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What is about to happen must happen. We both know that—my husband and me. We've known it for a while. We just couldn't find the timing, or the courage, or the final straw until now.

My biggest fear is that it won't work. That thirty days won't be enough. Or worse—that it will work, for a while, and then the old patterns will slither back in, just when we've let ourselves start to breathe again. Just when we've started to believe in something like peace.

When I say “it,” I know I mean him. But I also mean me. I've been part of this too—part of the silence, the survival attempts, the pretending. What comes next belongs to both of us.

Our family. Our marriage. Our lives as they should be. They all hang in the balance right now. What happens next will be shaped by the choices we make starting tomorrow morning.

My husband is an alcoholic. And tomorrow, he is going to rehab.



Day 1

February 13

Ben

I did the one thing that scared her most. I took a drink. Again.

Will she find it in her heart to forgive me? I know I am too old to keep making excuses for myself. I must stop this. I don't know how. I kept thinking that I could do it alone.

Her eyes. Begging me to stop. The fear in her eyes haunts me.

I know I have a problem. I have tried to deal with it in many ways. But I keep going back.

I never dreamed I would agree to this. Agree to go away. But I have agreed. I must agree. I am out of options, and I will lose my family if I don't stop.

I can do this. With God's help. When I come home there will be tools in place to help me deal with the urges.

If I could tell her anything she might believe right now, I would say this:

"You, sweetheart, give me the desire to move through the world. We have been through so much together. If I could hold you now my heart would be full. I know you do not want my arms around you at this

moment. You do not want my promises. You want action.

If I could find the trust in your eyes that I used to know, I would be content. You are my lover, the mother of my children, and my best friend. I know you did not sign up for this.

These words are not intended to regain your trust. That is used up.

I can only tell you I want you, and I need you more today than I did yesterday. That I've loved you more every day since the first day I met you. That most of all I want to give you a sober, loving, and honest husband with nothing to hide."

Mimi

I watched him put the baby to bed last night. The nursery was dark, and our little boy was crying. I was standing outside the door and could see them with the sliver of light that shone in from the laundry room across the hall. Ben was holding him close against his face and talking to him in a very low voice. I couldn't make out what he said, but whatever it was, Will was quickly soothed. As my husband laid him in the crib and turned on the mobile, I walked away. I didn't want Ben to know I had intruded on their last few private moments for the next month. He probably wouldn't have minded, but I wanted them to have that time.

Ben is gentle, and unlike many men, completely at ease caring for infants. He was the one who bathed both of our babies as newborns and pulled more than his share of middle-of-the-night feedings, especially after I returned to work and began supplementing with formula. He's thoughtful about what makes the baby comfortable—and no one makes ours laugh the way he does.

He is empathetic too. When Anna was born three years ago, I was afraid to carry her up the steps. They are hardwood, and I was terrified I would slip and drop her. So, I'd time taking her upstairs at night to when he went up. Then casually ask him to carry her. At some point, he caught on to what I was doing, and one night, told me to carry her myself. I insisted I couldn't. Then I told him why.

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Instead of calling me silly and shrugging me off, he placed the baby in my arms and walked behind us up the stairs. He did this every night for two weeks and never made me feel bad about needing the support.

After that, I started doing it myself.

It is almost impossible to juxtapose these images against the man he becomes when he drinks.

Focused only on where the next drink will come from, he spends considerable energy making sure he has a supply on hand. And it could be hidden anywhere. Check the backs of the cupboards, under the seats of his truck, his shop. Look behind the office supplies.

When he is bingeing, alcohol can turn up anywhere. Since the nightmare began, looking for his stash has become my least favorite but most common hobby.

Then there are the times it's hiding in plain sight. Like the bottle of vodka in his back pocket some months ago. He denied it, turned around before I could get the word 'liar' out, and there it was. LEAVE HIM—screams every single part of my psyche in those moments.

He is not a mean drunk. He tells jokes, shares stories, and laughs loudly when he's bombed. I must have enjoyed this part of him at some point. Early on. Not anymore. Not for a long time.

Once he starts it's all he can think about. Nothing else matters. Nobody can reach him. Physically, his words thicken. He moves slowly, deliberately, as if unsure his limbs will obey commands. A graceful, coordinated and talented craftsman when sober, those jerky movements make me sick. And that's when my anger boils over.

My private hell is a constant fear of the next binge. Six weeks? Six months? The damage from his binges grows. The time it takes for me to heal, or at least convince myself that I am healed, increases.

I drive him to the airport. We listen to music most of the way. It's been difficult to talk about our feelings since his last binge almost two weeks ago, so I use our time in the car to play relevant songs:

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“Jumper.”

“Still the One.”

“Stand by You.”

“I’m on Fire.”

“The Rising.”

And our wedding song—Frank Sinatra’s “Night and Day.”

I adore this man. I have never been as comfortable in my own skin with another human being. It gives him power over me that no one has ever had.

In the years we have been together, I have never begrudged him that power and he has never abused it—except when he drinks.

One last kiss, a long embrace, and he walks away. I lean against a post and watch him in the security line. Just before he puts his shoes on the x-ray belt he turns around, blows me a kiss, and mouths the words ‘I love you’. I smile, return the gesture and the endearment. I am wearing sunglasses so he cannot see me cry.

I can’t cry now. I have too much to do. Besides, if he does not do this he is doomed. I believe he is only a step away from the abyss right now. In that abyss, is also our family’s demise. I cannot stay and watch him destroy himself. I will not allow him to put our children at risk. His behavior becomes more dangerous with every binge. I must protect my children.

I feel ashamed saying this. I know he has become a danger. I can take steps to protect my children. But what about other people? Their children? They don’t know that my husband, who swore he would never drive drunk, has had two alcohol-related car accidents in the last two years. Two binges. Two accidents. And other people have no way to defend against what they do not know.

I also know that only God’s grace has saved us from that horror.



Jack and Coke

I was nineteen, tall and lanky with long blonde hair that tended to do its own thing—wild and wavy—and green eyes that gave away more than I ever meant to. I had just been ditched by my boyfriend. I don't remember the fight, only the sting of rejection and the way it made my chest feel hollow. So, I did what seemed natural at the time: I decided to drink about it.

There was a dive bar three blocks from my apartment, the kind of place that didn't bother to ask for IDs if they liked your face. Nick, the owner, had seen me enough times to know I wasn't twenty-one—but he served me anyway. That night, I walked in with my chin high, my heart wrecked and slid onto a backless barstool like I belonged there, and said, "Nick—shot of Jack and a Coke on the rocks, please."

He poured the drink and gave me a look I didn't know how to read back then.

Eight drinks later, I decided it was time to go home. I was out of cash and no longer steady on that narrow stool. The room was spinning hard and slow like a carousel in a thunderstorm. I tried to stand, and that's when things got interesting.

I crashed into the guy next to me—just tipped sideways and landed on him like a felled tree. He caught my arm and eased me back down before I could slide to the floor. I tried to talk, to apologize, maybe even explain—but whatever I said came out thick and broken. Or maybe I didn't speak at all. I don't remember.

Nick came over, looking worried. "You need to take a cab home," he said.

"I can't," I told him. "I'm broke. I spent my money on the Jack."

Without another word, he popped open the register, pulled out a five-dollar bill, and passed it across the bar. A hand reached from behind

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me—someone I never saw—and helped me up. I remember the cold air outside, a blur of movement, the slam of the cab door. Then nothing.

I don't remember getting home.

It took me two full days to recover. And I never got that drunk again.

It scared the crap out of me.



So, I had this experience, right? And it made me so sick that I never went that far again. But what if it didn't? What if it had the opposite effect? What if that taste made me want more the next time I drank and the next time after that? What if every time I had a problem, I reached for a bottle to smooth the rough edges, dull the pain? What if one taste of alcohol made me desire more so much, that once I started, I could not stop until I passed out? I don't know. That's not my story but it is Ben's.

He can stay away from it for months, years even, and he has. But once it passes his lips again it's like a switch is thrown and he either cannot or will not stop.

It's difficult for me to understand—that it's not a willful choice for him. A choice, yes, but not willful? When he talks about drinking, he uses the word "intend" a lot. There is this huge chasm, it seems, between what he tells himself can or will happen and what does happen when alcohol makes her entrance.

I hear people say it is a disease. On an intellectual level I accept that argument and feel sympathy for the many who suffer from it. But when it comes to the role that his drinking plays in my life, I lead with the emotional response every time. HOW – CAN – HE – SAY – HE – LOVES – US – AND – THEN – CHOOSE – TO – BRING – ALCOHOL – INTO – OUR – LIVES?

HOW CAN HE DO THIS TO ME?!!!!

I pray that the next 30 days are the beginning of a journey that helps us find answers to this question and many others. I pray that my husband finds the wisdom and knowledge he needs to walk the line (there's a country song about that).

Sending a prayer to Memphis (there's a country song about that too).

When I get home from the airport, there is a note.

Ben

Sweetheart,

I have put you on a terrible path with me. I never wanted to be here and even more, I never wanted to bring you with me. I want a life with you and the kids so much. I don't know why I do this. I don't know why I cannot stop. I don't know why I can't keep from starting and most of all I don't know why I do it when I know it is destroying us all.

Please wait for me. And pray.

I will get the help I need. Will you give me another chance? I know I have asked this many times. I know you are ready to go. Please give me a chance to get well. I want us so badly.

I miss you already, but I am doing this now so we can have the rest of our lives. I am doing what I must, because I cannot fight this alone anymore. It is beating me. I am terrified you will not wait for me, but I am doing this now because there is no other way.

30 days for the rest of our lives.

Be back sober and soon.

I love you.

Mimi

Sober and soon.



Day 2

February 14

Ben

I am here in this place. They tell me the notebook is my friend. I am in detox, but I am not detoxing from alcohol. I have not had a drink in two weeks. I am detoxing from Xanax.

Xanax is a problem, they say. I must be free of all addictive substances, they say. Benzos, the class of drugs Xanax belongs to, are the worst. If I had known they were going to take me off Xanax, I don't think I would have come.

I've been using Xanax as a shield against anxiety for years. My doctor at home gives it to me and I do not abuse it. But they say I cannot have it. I am very scared. If Xanax is bad for me, why does my doctor give it to me? I am hundreds of miles from home. Anxiety floods every breath I cannot take, and no Xanax.

My pocket is empty. The bottle I usually carry is not there. I am prescribed up to three pills a day, but I usually break them into pieces and take them when I feel the anxiety coming on. I don't go anywhere without the bottle. Wow.

Home feels very far away. I see her face in my mind. She sent me here with a little album of pictures and I look at the pictures, but she is beyond my reach. They are all beyond my reach.

I held my baby son last night and rocked him to sleep. I could have stayed in that chair with him in my arms all night, and I held him for a long time. At last, I put him down after kissing his fuzzy head, his cheeks, his forehead. I tucked him into his crib and left the room.

Then I turned left and walked to my daughter's room. She is three, the image of her mother, and mature beyond her years. She was sitting up in bed waiting for me. She can read already and that's what she was doing—a book about trees.

Stretching out on her bed beneath the canopied crown, I asked her about the book, and she told me. She knows I am leaving. "For work," we said. My wife travels a lot for business. I never do. But this is a concept that is familiar to her. I believe the lie can be forgiven.

I cannot keep writing about this. I can't concentrate. I can't remember what else we talked about. I can't think about that room—three shades of pink that she picked, and I painted. It's a princess room with princess kinds of things in it. Bad things are not supposed to happen to little girls who live in princess rooms.

But they do, obviously, since my princess's father is a drunk whose drinking is destroying her family.

Fuck, I want my Xanax. I need my Xanax. My mind won't stop. They are very far away.

What if I never get better?

What if I never go home?

Mimi

I woke up mad.

I want him to get better. I want him to be well. But anger is my dominant emotion today, and it is unrelenting. It strikes me that our whole life is about him and his drinking and his promises and his broken promises and starting the cycle over again.

Him, him, him, him, him.

Your mother died? Fuck you, I'm drinking.

It's your father's birthday 1,000 miles away and you want to be with him? Fuck you, I'm drinking. While I'm at it I think I will leave our infant son alone with my 80-year-old grandmother and drive into a neighbor's yard. Then top it off by getting arrested for DUI and spending the night in jail.

It's our daughter's birthday? Might as well have a drink.

Let's see—two of the last three new trucks he's had have been because of drunken wrecks. Here's how it goes down: he drives drunk, smashes up his vehicle, and rewards himself with a new one.

Guess who is driving the same car I was driving the day I met him? Oh, that would be me.

I am sick of this. He gets to go someplace so he can understand himself better, and I am left holding the bag.

OUR WHOLE FUCKING LIFE IS ABOUT HIM.

I'm all mad or madness.

And yet I answer the call from his therapist like a lovesick teenager.

The guy asks me questions about Ben's drinking. Talks about relapse prevention. I ramble on about being crazy for him, believing he might be the most selfish person on earth, and how we are broke so it will be difficult for us financially if he stays more than 30 days.

The guy must think I'm nuts. It will be a hardship if he has to stay more than a month, but I wouldn't put a price on his sobriety. I think I sounded really dumb.

He asks if I am planning to let Ben come home.

"Let?" I ask. "Hell yes, I adore the man."

What I want to say is: Just sprinkle some pixie dust on him and send him home. Now please.

HA ha ha ha HA! Am I crazy?

I'm so mad all day I can't see straight. Then the therapist calls, and I start blathering.

WTF?

Ben

Ok, I am supposed to write. I am supposed to tell you how I feel, right? Here goes.

My feet, calves and thighs are cramping. My stomach is in knots. My thoughts have been racing faster and faster. My back aches. My toes curl involuntarily. I can't take the medicine I paid for to help me through this part because it makes me incapable of finishing a sentence.

I can't sleep. It is 2 a.m. and I have not slept in 20 hours or more—yes, more. I came in here for beer and now I am being taken off Xanax?? Why? I never abused it. I can't remember anything since I got here.

I have got to pull my head out of my ass and move forward. I swear I had no idea benzos were so bad.

How am I going to get up in the morning and go to classes? I can't talk. Well, I will. I just will. How will I remember what they say? I'm supposed to remember this stuff, right? It's supposed to help me stay sober, right? I will. I just have to, right?

I need to remember. I need to learn. But I can't think. I can't focus on anything. No one will tell me if my mind will come back.

Will I ever be sharp again? I pray that I will, but it sure doesn't feel that way right now.

Mimi, I surely hope I can give you back your husband. He loves you too much to stay lost.

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I know they don't want me to be on Xanax, but isn't there something else? Is there a non-narcotic substitute? The anxiety is with me every fraction of every second of every minute of...

I want to see my doctor but have to fill out a bunch of forms to see him, and I get the impression I won't see him anytime soon anyway.

I think I get the concept of what it means to be here, but if I can't sleep how can I learn? How can I get better? I am frozen. I can't go forward, and I can't go back. The anxiety holds me completely.

They say it is withdrawal. If there is medicine out there, why can't we take it?

I must believe this will get better. It is 3 a.m., and the nurse is coming to see me.

We will get this fixed. I will get this fixed.

I hope this nurse is one of the nice ones...



What does it take to stay when everything is breaking?

AddictionLand: A Love Story in Real Life is the raw, unflinching account of one family's thirty-day journey through addiction and into early recovery. Told in two voices—Mimi's journal from home, Ben's writing from rehab—this memoir offers a rare look inside the daily fight to rebuild trust, protect children, and hold on.

It's a story of love under pressure. Of secrets, shame, and survival. Of the quiet, often invisible cost of addiction—and what happens when a couple chooses to stay and fight.

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