

# Beaker's Musical

By Sarah Schulman · April 12, 2014

Tags: Toronto // homelessness // drug addiction

## Summary

“Down on the corner” // “I have become comfortably numb.” //  
“Gimme shelter” // “Like a rolling stone” // “Wild horses”

Beaker's life could easily be a musical. Not a Disney musical. Like Mary Poppins or The Sound of Music. No, more realistic. Gritty. In the vein of Rocky Horror Picture Show. With plenty of characters. Just not in drag.

Beaker's not sure what kind-of character he is. The bad guy? The hopeless guy? The resilient guy? The social guy? His sense of who he is, and what is possible, can change as quickly as a green light goes red. One moment he's talking about going home to the woods of his childhood, near the birds and away from all the alcohol. The next moment he's talking about spending the \$20 we're giving him on Jack Daniels.

Beaker's not sure how many moments he has left. His kidneys are failing. And he's now drinking as many as 3 Listerine bottles a day. The reality is we're not likely to change his life course, now. If we cannot enable Beaker to have his version of a good life, how might we enable Beaker to have his version of a good death? To revisit the places that matter to him, to engage in different conversations with his family, to use dialysis in a reflective way? Could a process of good dying help to ease the sense of loss his friends will experience when he's gone - and serve as a prompt for change?

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# Cast of Characters



**Beaker** Real name Birdie. Loves bird songs and rock-n-roll. Has lived on the streets of Toronto, on-and-off, for 30+ years. Even with 3 rounds of dialysis a week, he just can't seem to stay away from the Street corner, where the friends are plentiful and the alcohol flows..



**Ozze, Kenny, Rob, and co** Beaker's friends on the Street corner. They share a common heritage and background: they grew up on the reserves and migrated to the big city several decades back. They found each other at the Drop-in Centre. And have been inseparable since.



**Leslie** Helped to start and manage the Drop-in Centre on the Street corner. More than 20 years ago. Keeping the Centre running is not a job. It's a labor of love. She's got street credibility and garners real respect.

# Realities

## Down on the corner, out in the street

*Willy and the Poorboys are playin;*

*Bring a nickel; tap your feet.*

★ **Creedence Clearwater Revival singing Down on the corner:** [youtube.com/watch?v=vrMvblpZFqo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrMvblpZFqo)

Beaker has been on the corner for over thirty years. In the old days, he'd be the one dancing. These days, he can only tap his feet. To music he plays from his portable boom-box. "His" is a generous pronoun. Beaker swiped the boom-box a few weeks back. "I feel bad I took it," Beaker says with a grin.

Beaker's grin could make even the most hardened passerby smile. It's so pure, so innocent, it so thoroughly masks the many layers of loss.

Beaker's best friend, Greg, unexpectedly passed several weeks ago. From an overdose. Greg's long-term partner had died from an overdose, several months prior. Beaker understands all too well what it feels like to lose a long-term partner. Because his girlfriend jumped in front of a train, many years back. He hasn't been in a serious relationship since.



Beaker's boom-box.

In the last 18 months, 25 members of the Drop-in Centre on the Corner have died. More than in any other year. We were interested in the normalization of death and loss. And exploring Social Contagion theories - often used to explain pockets or clusters of youth suicides. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - the United States' public health agency - defines contagion as "a process of by which "exposure to the suicide or suicide behavior of one or more persons influences others to commit or attempt suicide." We drew a social network map and asked Beaker to draw who in his network has died, who will be next, and talked about the reason for living and dying.

And it's not just people Beaker has lost. But physical capacity too. He loved to run. "I would just run and run and run." But then he was hit by a Toronto street car. Twice. A car ran him over. Once. And now his kidneys have given way. Beaker needs dialysis three times a week. Although he often only goes once or twice a week. "I just forget sometimes when I'm with my friends," Beaker notes.

Hearing Beaker talk about all the stuff he used to love to do, raises the question: How could we enable Beaker to gain new capabilities, not just lose old capabilities? Just like the Special Olympics gives folks with differing capabilities a platform to be active, how could we create adapted versions of activities for Beaker? Also, how could we turn Beaker's dialysis sessions into sessions to help him reflect and process what's happened in his life? Dialysis sessions last 5 hours - a huge chunk of time that could be about more than being hooked up to a machine.

Beaker has been on the drink for years, and years, and years. "I'm a chronic alcoholic," Beaker straightforwardly acknowledges. "I like wine. I drink Listerine, sometimes. OK, a lot of the time." Beaker has been known to drink up to two bottles of Listerine a day. Before all the wine and the Listerine, there was gasoline. Out on the reserve. Where there was nothing to do. "I've been sniffing gasoline since I was nine years old. It gives you a very bad high. I guess the only period I didn't drink was in jail, but then there was moonshine too."

## I have become comfortably numb

When I was a child

I caught a fleeting glimpse

Out of the corner of my eye.

I turned to look but it was gone

I cannot put my finger on it now

The child is grown,

The dream is gone

★ **Pink Floyd singing I have become comfortably numb:** [youtube.com/watch?v=Sf3pc-7gfOg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf3pc-7gfOg)



A bottle of Listerine goes for \$4.99 at Shoppers Drug Market.





Beaker still sees himself as the bratty child whom his mother unconditionally loved. “She wouldn’t have judged me and where I am today,” Beaker says.

Where Beaker is today is not necessarily where he wants to be. He goes back and forth. Between wanting to return home. To the reserve. And believing it’s impossible. “My life is a circle,” Beaker comments, as he looks at our Life Patterns cards. “I stay right in the middle. In a circle, there is no place to hide. There is never a break in the circle. My head is a circle.”

We used the [Transtheoretical Model of Change \(www.umbc.edu/psyc/habits/content/the\\_model\)](http://www.umbc.edu/psyc/habits/content/the_model) to group all of the people we met at the Drop-in centre. Beaker seems to be in the “contemplation stage” - going back and forth between wanting something different and wanting things to stay the same. How could the Drop-in Centre create a different experience for Beaker when he’s wanting something different - to help nudge and support him moving forwards? Right now, the Drop-in Centre does not have any mechanism or tool for differentiating between their members, or adapting their service & support offer.

**“In a circle, there is no place to hide. There is never a break in the circle. My head is a circle.”**

There was a break in the circle for his younger brother. As kids, they would drink Lysol together. Then, his brother met a beautiful woman, had some kids, found a job, has a home. I’m proud of him. But he is not me. I also went to college, but it didn’t do me no good,” Beaker admits.

Beaker thinks a lot about what home means. He has a subsidized apartment in the city, but sees it more as a four walls with a roof, and less a place of connection. He owns 10 acres of land on the reserve. There, he could build a log cabin. With lots of bird houses. Beaker loves song birds. Though he’s ashamed he can’t sing the same songs as his Elders. “I don’t speak in my own tongue, I feel ashamed about that.”



The Thursday morning Spirit Circle at the Drop-in Centre. With the elders. Beaker didn’t make it.

Indeed for all the ruminating about home, there’s little action. Beaker has arranged to go home before. His sister was all ready to pick him-up and take him away from the Drop-in centre corner. But for some reason, he couldn’t do it. Maybe deep down he knew that the reality of home wasn’t as romantic as the memory of home. Bird songs don’t have the same lure as rock & roll. “I keep going back to the Drop-in centre for my friends and their alcohol,” Beaker acknowledges. He hasn’t found a way to reconcile the two places, the two identities.

“I get so depressed sometimes. I want to hang myself,” Beaker tells me. “It can hit me like a ton of bricks. I can’t breathe. Then I think about my mom, and how much she loved me.”

How could we use [narrative therapies \(www.dulwichcentre.com.au/what-is-narrative-therapy.html\)](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/what-is-narrative-therapy.html) with folks like Beaker - not in clinical settings - but on the street corner? Beaker loves to tell his story. How could we play back alternative versions of his story, and help Beaker to recognize where he actually has changed before? How might we help create storytelling events with his whole family? And give Beaker support to make it home - perhaps with a role like “bird guide”?

**Wild Horses**

*Childhood living is easy to do*

*The things you wanted I bought them for you*

*Graceless lady you know who I am*

*You know I can’t let you slide through my hands*

*Wild horses couldn’t drag me away*

★ [The Rolling Stones singing Wild Horses: youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_em\\_AihIOo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_em_AihIOo)

Beaker likens himself to a wild horse. Untamable. Even when hooked up to the dialysis machines. He has outlived his doctor’s expectations. By about two years. There’s something about his spirit that just cannot be contained by institutions, by professionals, even by his family. “My sisters and brothers think I’m the same old Beak, you can’t change me.” Without skipping a beat, Beaker tells me, “And when you pay me for this interview, I’m going to go get drunk. 4 Jack Daniels for \$20.”



Beaker showing off his injuries and discussing his run-ins with medical care.



## My Take-Aways

### Beaker's versions of good living

**Being one with the land.** "I miss home, the most. I haven't been home in a long while. Sometimes I think I'd like to hang-up my guns and go home. I've got some land given to me, and to build a log cabin. I would have plenty to do - to trim the trees, to clean everything."

**Enjoying people and music.** "I love good company and I love music: Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Beatles. Just being with them."

**Seeing the world.** "I would have loved to experience life outside of North America. Go hop around with the kangaroos in Australia. I like adventure."

### Beaker's self-identified resources

**Patty.** "That's my housing worker. I am going to tell her how much I can't stand living in my apartment, with my neighbors, and the rules. At my apartment, they deliver us food like we're the elderly. If she can help me out, I'll give her a hug."

**Leslie.** "She keeps the Drop-in Centre going. It's a beautiful place. The place where our friends go."

**The bible.** "I got me a bible at home. It makes me feel good to read it."

**Music.** "It can be fucking beautiful, and true."

### Beaker's tensions

**Self-perception and others' perceptions.** "I'm a tree with many branches and I have to make choices. Not sure what I will choose. People expect me not to change."

**Social health versus emotional health.** "I come to the meeting place for the friendship and for the alcohol. I come to drink with my friends. I'm not really into the drug scene, but if somebody offers it to me, yes, I'll do it. I don't look for it. I missed dialysis last week."

**Culture versus capacity.** "I'm ashamed that I cannot communicate with my Elders after all of these years."

**House versus home.** "I have a house. But I can't stand where I live now. I can't stand my neighbors."



### Sarah Schulman

Sarah is a sociologist who likes to split her time between living rooms and state houses. She's worked with governments in 6 countries to try and change how policy is made and evaluated. From 2010-2012, she co-ran InWithFor and worked with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation to launch 3 new social solutions, including the award-winning Family by Family. She's got a Doctorate in Social Policy from Oxford University, and a Masters in Education from Stanford University. This is Sarah's fourth start-up org. Get in touch at [sarah@inwithforward.com](mailto:sarah@inwithforward.com)!