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She's a Lush

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Masters in
Creative Writing**

at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand.

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2018

Abstract

In this thesis I examine the form of memoir and look at how and why female memoirists use fictional techniques to establish their narrative of problem drinking. Over the last decade, there has been a rise in the number of memoirs being written about the problematic relationship between women and their drinking, yet there is still very little about this topic from a New Zealand perspective. I argue that memoir is an important tool to examine larger social issues through a personal viewpoint and that the use of memoir gives power to women's voices on particular issues. This thesis is comprised of two parts. Section one is a critical essay entitled 'Women who Drink and Memoir.' Section Two is a creative component consisting of a memoir piece entitled 'She's a Lush.' The critical essay examines *Drink: The Intimate Relationship between Women and Alcohol* by Ann Dowsett- Johnston (2013) ; *Lit* by Marry Karr (2010); *Drinking: A Love Story* by Caroline Knapp (1996); *Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget* by Sarah Hepola (2015); *A Manual for Cleaning Women* by Lucia Berlin (1977) and *Mrs D. is Going Without* by Lotta Dann (2014), exploring how and why they use social and medical data, metaphor, chronology, characterisation and intimate detail to tell their story of problem drinking. The creative component is my own memoir about my problem drinking set in a New Zealand cultural context.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank my Massey University supervisor, Dr Tina Makereti, for her guidance and expertise throughout this thesis. It would not have been possible without her invaluable feedback and encouragement.

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PART ONE: WOMEN WHO DRINK AND MEMOIR

“If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

- Zora Neale Hurston¹

“Memoir wasn’t anymore necessarily what one should know but what one could know.”

- Lorraine Adams²

This thesis will explore the form of memoir and the way contemporary female writers use narratives of their own experiences of drinking alcohol to communicate, structure and explore the wider cultural issue of female alcohol consumption. How and why do female memoirists use techniques such as characterisation, chronology, social and medical data, and fictional techniques to share their narrative of problem drinking?

Over the last decade, there has been a rise in the number of memoirs being written about the relationship between women and their alcohol consumption. Women’s drinking is becoming a more prominent issue. Last year, I began reading memoirs about the relationship between women and alcohol, including: *Drink: The Intimate Relationship between Women and Alcohol* (2013) by Ann Dowsett Johnston; *Drinking: A Love Story* (1996) by Caroline Knapp; *Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget* (2015) by Sarah Hepola; *Lit* (2010) by Mary Karr and *Mrs D is Going Without*

¹ Cited in *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr 27

² Cited in *Reality Hunger*, David Shields 10

(2014) by Lotta Dann. After reading each one, I would hunt for another one, each woman's story resonating with my own. Another text I have included in this thesis is Lucia Berlin's, *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (1977) to examine how fictional techniques can be used in memoir. What struck me about each memoir was my ability as a reader to relate so closely to these women's stories. However, when I came to the end of the trail of women's memoirs about drinking, I wanted more from a New Zealand perspective. According to my research, there is only one example of a New Zealand memoir that focuses primarily on a woman giving up drinking – *Mrs D is Going Without* by Lotta Dann – so the genre doesn't seem to have taken off in New Zealand as it has in the United States.

Social and Medical Data in Memoir

Dowsett-Johnston weaves her own narrative into a wider discussion of the larger social problem of women's alcohol consumption. The incorporation of social and medical data is important because “traditionally, alcohol use disorders were thought to be a problem largely affecting men” (Stewart, Gavric & Collins, 341). Dowsett-Johnston has used data to reinforce her hunch that alcohol is a serious social issue for women: “it would take all my journalistic skills to put what was killing me – and it turns out a growing number of women – into some profound and meaningful context” (21). The genre of memoir is a way to understand what has happened and how this has affected a woman's life. Dowsett-Johnston states: “Journalism as therapy: it's how I've untangled a lot of

my own story – depression, alcoholism” (109). Thomas Larson in *The Memoir and the Memoirist* asks: “Why is the form so popular? What is it people are seeking when writing memoir?” (xi) It is clear that memoir is a way for women to gain control of their thoughts and views over social contexts.

From a feminist perspective, using memoir to explore the issue of problem drinking allows the memoirist to take back power over the socially unacceptable situation in which they find themselves. In her book, *Feminism and Addiction*, Claudia Bepko explains: “Feminist analysis examines problems within the context of power: it looks at the ways that inequality of power both historically and currently shapes our internal, interpersonal, and social patterns of relating and our experience of self” (1). Narrative as a form of exploration on a social issue enables the writer to order, shape and reflect on experiences in order to understand the wider world, as Peter Brooks states: “Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told” (3). Writers can use narrative to research a topic by putting themselves at the centre of the topic and using their own life experiences to structure their search. Importantly, successful memoirists can also invite readers to reflect on their own lives, their own experiences, and question the social order in the same way.

Memoir gives voice to women of this era who face challenges in their relationship with alcohol. Dowsett-Johnston needed to include her research in her memoir in order to answer the questions that she was probing as a journalist. But how to do it well? Karr says: “Facts are the meat and potatoes of writing – necessary for a meal but devoid of much innate savor” (123). This is why social and medical data, if used,

needs to be surrounded by intimate detail in order to allow the voice of the narrator to come through to the reader on a more personal level than is possible with factual information.

Lotta Dann provides factual information from a report called *Women and Alcohol in Aotearoa/New Zealand* in her introduction so as not to distract the reader from the personal story. In all memoirs, facts need to be included in order to orientate the reader, for example the name, age and hometown of a character. But one of the other memoirs listed above have such overt factual data as *Drink*. This is probably because of the difficulty associated with including factual information as part of a narrative. Karr explains: “The aim in memoir is to make sure the reader doesn’t notice [they’re] being fed a string of facts. They’re sprinkled into other writing like pepper – there when you need them but otherwise invisible” (124). The facts must be embedded in the narrative and be placed carefully so as not to “yank the reader out of scenes” (123). Ultimately though, the main rule when providing factual information in a memoir is: Don’t do it without embedding it to a personal story. In Dowsett-Johnston’s chapter on female underage drinking “The Age of Vulnerability,” before giving us any statistics, she introduces us to Laura: “By grade ten, she was taking vodka to school in a chocolate-milk container, drinking in class” (75). Only by interweaving social and medical data in a gripping narrative which employs all the other tools of memoir – chronology, characterisation, intimate and personal details, setting and figurative language – can it be successful.

Place in Memoir

What would a memoir be without place? Why do I feel the need to read women's perspectives of problem drinking located in a place I know? While it is informative, what is not present in Dowsett-Johnston's memoir is information directly relating to New Zealand culture and women and places I recognise. I found some of this information in Dann's book *Mrs D is Going Without*. The discussion of women's problem drinking must happen here, in New Zealand.

The culture surrounding a narrative on problem drinking is important. Nedra Reynolds in *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* (2014), explains that "geographical locations influence our habits, speech patterns, styles and values" (11). The identities of people "take root from particular sociogeographical intersections, reflecting where a person comes from and to some extent, directing where she is allowed to go" (11). Hence the importance of New Zealand and its culture to me as a reader. Place is particularly important for New Zealand women to be able to relate to what they're reading on a deeper level. Place is not just physical, it is cultural. Space is understood as "contested terrain filled with ideological struggles over political and poetical meaning as well as actual physical territoriality" (Berberich et al cited in Boardman, 685). Women need to read a memoir where they recognise this space because it is *their* space where their political and poetical meanings are present.

Just as the word place can be large so too can it encompass small places. Karr explains the need, when writing a scene, to help the reader have a sense of smell, taste,

touch, image and noise (*The Art of Memoir*, 71). Scenes take place not only within a political landscape but also within a car or a hotel room: “Mother’s yellow station wagon slid like a Monopoly icon along the gray road that cut between fields of Iowa corn which was chlorophyll green and punctuated in the distance by gargantuan silver silos and gleaming, unruined tractors glazed cinnamon red” (*Lit* 27). The reader needs to be placed *there*, wherever there may be. As Reynolds notes, we have geographical requirements in terms of locating ourselves (168). Lucia Berlin manages to locate the reader in a scene where she is taken to a rehab facility in the middle of nowhere: “La Vida was thirty miles out of Albuquerque. In the desert. Nothing around, not a tree, not a bush. Route 66 was too far to walk to. La Vida had been a radar site, a military installation during World War II. It had been abandoned since then. I mean abandoned” (171). Simply put, the reader would be lost without place. If the description of place is concrete and vivid, the reader can extend the memoirist’s experiences to themselves. This is particularly important when the memoirist’s rendition of place is not familiar to the reader. In this way, the experience of the individual writer can provoke not just empathy on a human level, but reflection on a social level.

Just as important as the physical description of place in a memoir is the *language* of a place – the way people speak allows the reader to hear the story and voice of the place. Each place has its own special dialogue and sayings: “The use of phraseologisms as a means of expressing emotions has been discussed in connection with their semantic/pragmatic functions and their contextual senses” (Koller cited in Szpila, 536). We can see the use of idioms heavily used in Karr’s *Lit*: “This language both rocked me back

and echoed how Daddy talked. I mean, if he thought I was persisting in something I couldn't get done he'd say, You keep trying to thread a noodle up that wildcat's ass; if he thought somebody was poor, He couldn't buy a piss ant a wrestling jacket" (52). Here we see the distinctiveness and specificity of the language of this place. Using this idiomatic language not only takes the reader to the place where this language is used, it also gives the memoirist a more distinct voice in which to tell their story.

Theme in Memoir

"The power of memoir is in its concentration, the narrowness of its scope, the intensity and clarity of its revelations"

- Lee Gutkind³

The memoir is a creative work "in which the author ch[oo]ses] a particular life experience to focus on" (Larson, 15). It is this "choosing" that interests me. Memoirs do not chronologically track a person's every step through life. The memoirist must choose what to include and as Larson puts it, they need to pick a theme. Roxane Gay, in her memoir *Hunger*, elects to focus on her obese body as a theme. Mary Karr has written *The Liar's Club*, *Cherry* and *Lit*. Each is a personal memoir yet they all focus on a different theme of her life, the third one being her problematic relationship with alcohol. As Hampl suggests, "You can write multiple memoirs... coming at your life from

³ Gutkind 59

different angles” (cited by David Shields in *Reality Hunger*, 41). This element of choice means the writer does not have to go into detail about everything that has ever happened to them but can choose parts of their life that are relevant to their chosen theme, in my case women and alcohol. Theme choice is a technique used by memoirists to zoom in on the issue they feel is most relevant to their memoir. As Lee Gutkind in *You Can't Make this Stuff Up* explains: “If you think of a writer as a camera, a memoirist documents a close-up through the zoom lens, revealing the most intimate and personal details” (59). This is how memoirists select which intimate and personal details to reveal to the reader. In relation to this research, the chosen details must relate to the writer’s battle with alcoholism and any other parts of their life that they see as relevant to this theme. Both Birkets and Karr, when discussing memoir, bring up Vladimir Nabokov as an example. Nabokov himself said: “The following of such thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (Nabokov, cited in Birkets, 15). The “intimate and personal details” of memoir allow the reader to get to know the writer in an up close and personal way, which creates a more intense reader-writer relationship, particularly through the exploration of a theme that the writer and reader may have in common. Life events and particular themes, however, do not happen in isolation from the larger issues at play in the culture around us. As explained in *Feminist Perspectives on Addictions*, “The personal is political” (Van Den Bergh, 5). Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, so often cited as an example of memoir, would not have been the gripping tale it is without the larger issues of poverty and politics. Dowsett-Johnston discusses the rise in equality for women and how this has affected their alcohol

consumption. In terms of both narrowness and politics, then, memoir is ideally suited to examining the issue of alcohol in New Zealand, where we have entrenched and harmful attitudes which cause significant social damage as documented in the *Women and Alcohol in Aotearoa/New Zealand* report by Alcohol Healthwatch (2013).

Gutkind discusses both memoir and creative nonfiction and the difference between public and private pieces: “The ideal creative nonfiction piece is where the pendulum stops somewhere around the middle – a public subject with an intimate and personal spin” (62). Each writer in my research lets their pendulum rest between the public issue of women’s alcohol consumption and their own personal story by using intimate details of their own lives to look at the larger issue of women’s problem drinking. The lack of women’s memoirs on problem drinking in the New Zealand context could reflect the extent to which we – unlike the Americans – are uncomfortable in acknowledging alcohol as a social issue, as a theme we are willing to explore, no matter how intimate and compelling the personal story. When Marina Benjamin discusses mental health issues and memoir, she says “it marries personal narratives with the wider causes of fighting for visibility and understanding, overturning stigma, battling guilt and shame and making the case for openness and acceptance” (68). This is precisely the same reason memoirs about women and alcohol are important. These women’s memoirs highlight why and how women become alcoholics. It is because “experiences in one’s personal life can be seen as the individualised outcome of social inequality” (Van Den Berg, 5). These are key reasons *why* women write memoir – to

challenge the stigma, to raise questions over social inequalities, to explore the guilt and to challenge the stereotypes.

In “The Memoir Craze,” a chapter from *You Can't Make this Stuff Up*, Gutkind discusses James Wolcott's opinion – voiced in *Vanity Fair* – that creative nonfiction is a form of navel gazing and “a sickly transfusion whereby the weakling sensitive voice of fiction is inserted into the beery carcass of nonfiction” (57). Karr, in *The Art of Memoir*, originally battled with this perception of memoir herself, she felt it to be weak and whiny (92). Gutkind believes that memoirs are powerful because they “reveal the intimacies of ordinary lives” (57). It is through the lens of ordinary lives that larger issues can be explored intimately and the act of attempting to silence such reflection (as so many critics want to do) is the act of wanting to silence a voice that is viewed as introspective and not important. Gutkind explains that in contrast to viewing small details as unimportant, some writers view them as “just as important as major themes and ideas” (57). I believe that using memoir to explore larger social issues means that the small, intimate details of a person's life are meaningful within a larger context. It is both the larger issues and the smaller details of the writer's life that are important in memoir, particularly within the context of women and the challenges they face. Memoir, as a form, allows women's voices, which have often been silenced and kept behind closed doors, to be heard. In *Learning through Memoirs: Self, Society and History* (2016), Taber et al explain “in contrast to a passive historical abstraction, the impact of the memoirs framed a more personable, dynamic and *accurate* interpretation of a historical time and context” (24). Women choose memoir as a way to communicate because the

genre can meaningfully include the small details of their lives within a larger social issue. In *Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Leigh Gilmore says, "the subject of autobiography... can be more accurately described as the object of production for the purposes of cultural critique... It is in this act of interpretation, of consciousness, that we can say a woman may exceed representation within dominant ideology" (12). The more that women write memoirs about alcohol addiction, the more these voices can be heard and challenge dominant ideologies of a patriarchal society where "the setup for addiction development... is a generalized sense of inadequacy, insecurity and alienation" (Van Den Bergh, 7) rather than a moral problem.

For the most part, historically, drinking and alcoholism have been seen as male problems. Focusing on women's relationship with alcohol is a relatively new field: "In the last decades, a considerable body of knowledge regarding differential gender issues in substance abuse has evolved" (Zilberman, 3). By increasing the number of women writing about women's drinking issues, we can increase the understanding of this social issue and challenge current ideologies, no matter how new and uncomfortable this might be for us as New Zealanders. This evolution of research is important for women who suffer from an alcohol problem. These stories help women readers with their own journey. Sarah Hepola dedicates her memoir *Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget* to "Anyone who needs it." This sums up, to me, why memoir is an important genre. Says Dinty Moore: "Memoir is not about 'look at me, look at me,' at least not when done well. Instead it is about trying to understand the vexing mysteries of human

existence” (29). Memoir is not navel gazing. It is a form of social commentary using the intimate and personal details of one’s own life as a base to explore a larger issue. This is a political act. It is an individual lens through which we can view society, or a portion of it.

Chronology in Memoir

“There is no faster way to smother the core meaning of a life, its elusive threads and connections, than with the heavy blanket of narrated event. Even the juiciest scandals and revelations topple before the drone of, “and then... and then...””⁴

- Sven Birkerts

To write their narrative of problem drinking, women memoirists use a variety of techniques. Chronology is an important tool in memoir writing. The use of different time frames in memoir allows us to see characters (including the narrator) in a number of ways as human characters who can change over time. Moving back and forth between the now the narrator writes in (usually when they are alcohol free), the time before they quit drinking (often a stressful time), and their childhood, is a chronology common to memoirs about women and alcohol. Each writer I have mentioned uses analepsis to look back on their childhood. Using signal phrases to take the reader back such as “I remember” (Knapp, 39) or “One day (I don’t remember exactly when...)” (Knapp, 2) is

⁴ Birkerts 3

a way to tell the reader the narrator is moving to a different time frame. Things must start somewhere and incidents from childhood provide memoirists with details that help explain parts of themselves to the reader. They also allow the reader to connect and empathise more with the author and affects the way we view and judge their later behaviour. Dowsett-Johnston tells us of her family move to Africa: “Back then, as I sat with my parents on sticky chairs on an unforgiving African afternoon, my confidence was shaken...It was a wobbly time for me” (29). Hepola looks back on her college years: “I lived in a sprawling dorm that was more like a prison. I stood at social events in my halter top and dangly earrings, looking like the preppies my fashionably rumped classmates abhorred. “You’re so Dallas,” one guy told me which I understood to be an insult” (58). Looking back on certain events in the memoirists childhood and adolescence can help the reader understand how the past has shaped the writer’s alcohol use and because many of the situations are familiar, such as the quintessential teenage struggle to fit in, the reader can identify with the writer and is positioned alongside her in her journey. The memoirist must move back and forth between more than one time frame to create this complex interplay of formative and current experience. Simply plotting a life chronologically does not provide the reader with the message of a greater theme.

At the age of 48, Sven Birkerts, author of *The Art of Time in Memoir*, realised that time was “not psychologically, a linear continuum” (5). Maureen Murdoch uses the jigsaw as a metaphor for memory: “We put back together fragments of our life” (21). The jigsaw is not chronological or linear. This is why the treatment of chronology is

important. The memoir cannot stay in one moment of time always, neither can it plot the course of a life in perfect order. The art of a good memoir is in its dancing between time frames, connecting pieces that then develop the theme into a holistic picture. “The best default seemed to be a work comprising at least two time lines — present and past. The now and the then (the many *thens*), for it is the juxtaposition of the two — in whatever configuration — that creates the quasi-spatial illusion most approximating the sensations of lived experience, of recollection merging into the ongoing business of living” (Birkerts, 6). We can see this use of chronology in Dann’s chapters in which she uses diary entries from the difficult times she experienced while giving up alcohol. This is also a technique used by Dowsett-Johnston to take the reader back to particular timeframes in her life. Memoirists use chronology to service theme and narrative shape.

Characterisation in Memoir

“The point is people”⁵

- William Zinsser

Characterisation is also a technique of memoir that is central to the telling of an alcoholic woman’s story. What is evident in each of my model memoirs is the presentation of the importance of the role of family in these women’s lives. Birkerts explains that the “majority of contemporary memoirs turn significantly on the struggles

⁵ Zinsser 18

with the mother or the father” (17). In Dowsett-Johnston’s chapter “The Daughters’ Stories. Growing up with an Alcoholic Mother,” we learn about her mother in greater detail: “When my mother returned from a stint in rehab, our whole family walked on eggshells. We were accustomed to a mother who slept much of the day, paced the halls at night, ice cubes tinkling. We were used to her 2 a.m. rants, her anger, her quixotic temper and cutting sarcasm. We were not used to this smaller, shaky person, who looked painfully vulnerable, remorseful, and soft. She was like a newly hatched chick, feminine and lovely — and utterly foreign to us” (187 - 188). We are witness to both the character of the mother from the child’s point of view and also the character of the mother from the adult daughter. It is the same woman but viewed from different angles. This use of intimate detail and the contradictory tension in the characterisation of the mother makes her come alive for the reader. She is both bad and good, both loved and unloved. The memoirist allows the reader to see the mother character from a range of perspectives and angles. In order for characterisation to be effective, it needs to be multi-faceted.

So too can we see Karr’s mother in *Lit* from the perspective of a small child when she attempts to murder both Karr and her sister, then we see her from the point of view of a teenager heading off to college with her mother driving her there: “To look at her behind the wheel, with the mess she could make of a peach, appalled me. She was so primordial. She had to wipe the juice off her chin with the back of her hand” (28). Later, we see her as a helpful grandmother, coming to help Karr with her son when he is a toddler. Characterisation is essential in memoir because real-life characters are not one dimensional – they are real people, some still living. Even minor characters need to be

characterised enough to carry the narrative along, and even if characters are present in the memoir for a short time, they need attention in order to be vividly presented on the page. We can see this in Karr's depiction of Etheridge in *Lit: A Memoir*: "Such an unlikely saviour. Etheridge sometimes banged on my apartment door at three a.m., trying to mooch money for dope. Mary once caught him in the bathroom – with his kids in the next room – a hypodermic in his jugular" (58). Here again we see the use of intimate detail and the contradictory tension of the character, specifically his role as both father and drug addict, to make him come alive for the reader, even though he is a minor character.

It's not just characterisation of others that the memoirist needs to worry about – they need to present a full and honest portrayal of themselves. To do this, the memoirist must allow the reader into the dark recesses of their mind – places where it can be very uncomfortable to shine a light. We can see this honesty in and search for the truest of selves in Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story*. Precisely because to be an alcoholic woman is to tell lies and be untrue to oneself, Knapp had to go digging for her true self: "I once heard a woman at a meeting define alcoholism as a fundamental inability to be honest, not so much with other people but with the *self*" (Knapp, 90). A memoir can only be successful if the the memoirist attempts to present an intimate portrayal of their own character through their writing. We can see from Knapp that the author can take the reader along for that ride: "For the next decade I rarely talked to friends about the relationship with Roger and when I did, I described it the easy way: he was the villain

and I was the victim. There's truth in that, but it's also true that I put myself in his path, that I made myself an easy target, and that drinking facilitated that process" (9).

A tool that can be used by a memoirist to expand their own character is to look at themselves as others might view them: "My closest friends used to say they could see it in my eyes, my drunkenness. They could see my eyelids grow heavy and they'd notice a slight retreat, a sense that I'd shut down on some key level" (Knapp, 17). Here, by using the perception of others, we can gain a fuller, more honest picture of the narrator's character. Moments like these, where the memoirist uses outside observations to illustrate themselves, create a tone of self-reflection, a willingness to recognise what she couldn't or wouldn't see then, and that honesty both authenticates and deepens the emotional significance of the experience for the reader. As in the use of fictional techniques, the narrator can use the eyes of others to view herself from a removed perspective: "An outsider walking past my cubicle that morning would have seen a petite woman of thirty-four with long, light brown hair pulled back in a barrette, neat and orderly looking" (Knapp, 14). This juxtaposes the previous example as we are seeing the objective, external characterisation of professionalism which is in stark contrast to the memoirist's own naked admission of crippling insecurity. Knapp can then come back from this removed perspective and reveal what lies underneath the surface of her character: "Beneath my own witty, professional facade were oceans of fear, whole rivers of self-doubt" (Knapp, 16). In both cases the characterisation effectively connects us on an emotional level; we empathise with the memoirist and are positioned more securely by their side.

Memoirists use chronology and characterisation, then, to position the reader empathetically. The intensity of the experiences they relate are key to the work's effectiveness. However carefully positioned the reader is, if the experiences do not resonate, dismay, exalt or even shock, the reader's interest, connection and crucially, empathy, will quickly wane.

Metaphor in Memoir

Metaphor is an important device in distilling and concentrating experience. The use of metaphor to describe a woman's problematic relationship with alcohol is used in memoir as a way of expressing emotion in narrative. Gibbs et al. (cited in Szpila, 538) observe how narrators in autobiographical writing use metaphorical language to reveal their intense emotions in a clear and concrete fashion. Knapp uses the metaphor of water, as does Dowsett-Johnston. The effects of alcohol are illustrated with the same sense of inevitability and silent threat as a river: "Alcohol travels through families like water over a landscape, sometimes in torrents, sometimes in trickles, always shaping the ground it covers in inexorable ways" (Knapp, 28); and in a more abstract sense, the river again appears, used to emphasise the intergenerational nature of alcoholism while hinting at its capacity to drown its victims, or perhaps carry them off: "A river runs through our family, through our bloodlines" (Dowsett-Johnston, 36). But the main metaphor Knapp uses is that of the love story, of alcoholism as affair, sweet addiction, obsession, undoing: "Anyone who's ever shifted from general affection and enthusiasm for a lover

to outright obsession knows what I mean: the relationship is just there, occupying a small corner of your heart, and then you wake up one morning and some indefinable tide has turned forever and you can't go back" (6). The metaphor of a love story works because that's what alcoholism is — an emotional and physical attachment to a substance. In her article "Confronting Addictions", Lynne Shallcross interviews E.J. Essics who explains that "Alcohol becomes the primary relationship. It becomes the intimate partner. Everything else becomes secondary" (29). Hence the power of the relationship metaphor: "When you love somebody, or something, it's amazing how willing you are to overlook the flaws" (Knapp, 10). We can see this metaphor of the lover in Dowsett-Johnston's work also when alcohol is described as a handsome man in a black tuxedo (1). This metaphor is so effective for the reader because it personifies the addiction and humanises the victim. The experience becomes one to share, like a relationship, one to identify with, to sympathise with. The reader can forgive the memoirist her dangerous and fatal attraction, and perhaps feel the vicarious thrill of it themselves.

Metaphor is also – crucially – used in memoir to describe the destruction alcohol can cause to the narrator's life, and satisfy the reader's fascination with the intensity of the addiction. Knapp portrays alcohol as a hungry, malevolent monster: "It could eat its way through my life in exactly the same way cancer eats its way through bones and blood and tissue destroying everything" (3). Karr describes the emotional torment she experiences when she is drinking alcohol by using a storm metaphor: "There's snow in my head, too. Wide blizzards of bad news blowing sideways" (175). Again, the power and indifference of the natural world is drawn on to intensify the experience. Then there

are the metaphors used for the emotion of early sobriety: “New sobriety is a fingernail-on-the-blackboard experience” (Dowsett-Johnston, 59). Each of the the memoirs researched connect with the reader through an emotional narrative and this is why the use of metaphor is vital. Successfully communicating the intensity of the experience is essential to not only understanding the memoirist’s plight but also to satisfying a vicarious need on the part of the reader. In part, the intensity of the reader’s eventual catharsis depends on the depths of the memoirist’s fall. The vividness of her experience therefore has to grip and shock, like Dowsett-Johnston’s cringe-inducing blackboard, or Karr’s snowstorm and cancer-monster.

Intimate Detail in Memoir

The tale of a woman’s alcohol consumption is a private and emotive one. It is not easy to tell and leaves a memoirist wide open to criticism. The models I have chosen for this thesis are all willing to open to providing intimate details to appeal to their readers’ sense of feeling close and intimate with the writer. Says Larson: “To see the [memoir] properly, we have to look more closely and the canvas has to contain more detail – detail that is revealing and reflective, textured and telling, exclusive and sharp” (17). This honesty provides emotional intensity for the reader: “For such emotionally intense memoirs we need emotionally revealing memoirists, authors who are willing to put themselves on the couch, under the lamp, into the darkness, sometimes as they are living or soon after they have lived the emotional mire they are working with, and perhaps,

waking up in” (Larson, 18). No two memoirs are ever alike and “no matter how telescoped our thematic and emotional emphasis is, the story is still a story: it is subjective and distinct” (Larson, 19). Hepola reveals waking up in bed in the middle of sexual intercourse with a man she cannot remember meeting: “I’m on top of a guy I’ve never seen before, and we’re having sex” (2). Knapp reveals intimate details of her drinking past: “staggering out of the car when we arrived, loud and obnoxious and falling-down drunk” (88). Dowsett-Johnston remembers using alcohol as a coping mechanism when a friend of her son’s dies (60). These personal and intimate details allow the reader to get to know the writer as a person and as a woman. The writer must reveal details of their life in order to open themselves up to the reader. “The best writers make you feel they’ve disclosed their soft underbellies. Seeing someone naked thrills us a little” (Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, xxiii). Like all memoirists before them, these narrators “make use of such confessional moments not to complain, gain attention or sell books, but to consider how various and nuanced the self is – and to fight the silencing bonds of custom and propriety” (Bartkevicius, 138). Metaphor, simile and specific detail are tools a memoirist uses to describe the intimate details of their life and their relationship with alcohol. They help us understand how a person is feeling and what exactly it is they are seeing. “Specific detail is the foundation of nonfiction writing, and nowhere is it more important than in a memoir” (Zinsser, 7). Mary Karr uses the word “carnal” and I cannot find a better one. Without intimate detail, we would not know the narrator. They would not have a ‘voice’. This intimate detail is what provides the voice of the memoirist. Voice *is* personal.

Fiction in Memoir

“But between what we remember and what really happened are the shadows from which the truth will ultimately reveal itself”⁶

- Peter Ives

A different approach is exemplified by Lucia Berlin, who uses the short story format in her book, *A Manual for Cleaning Women*. Berlin alternates between using third person and first person narratives. Lydia Davis in her foreword, “The Story is the Thing,” discusses how Berlin’s son said of his mother: “Ma wrote true stories, not necessarily autobiographical but close enough for horseshoes,” meaning that Berlin’s “fictional” stories are largely “autobiographical.” Davis describes this as “auto-fiction (“self-fiction”), the narration of one’s own life, lifted almost unchanged from the reality, selected and judiciously, artfully told” (Davis, x.ii). This technique was evident in Salman Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton*. In his essay “Betrayed Sentiments: Joseph Anton and the Phraseology of Emotional Representation”, Grzegorz Szpila explains that despite it being a memoir, “Joseph Anton becomes the protagonist of the memoir, narrated in the third person, which allows Rushdie to look at his own life from a certain removed perspective” (1). This is the case in Berlin’s stories where she looks at her own character from a distance: “Not that she didn’t care about what she had done. She didn’t

⁶ Ives 154

remember, didn't own the deed at all" (Berlin, 167). This removed perspective allows Berlin to explore her actions. We can trust then that Lucia Berlin is telling a *truth* about being an alcoholic woman through her stories.

There is always a blurring between truth and fiction anyway. But how relevant is truth in memoir? Daniel Lehman explains that "the inner/outer relationship of character and construction, and the potential struggle over voice and meaning, matters much more than safely factual certainty" (66). There is much debate on the idea of truth in memoir, with the majority of it stemming from the unreliability of memory: "How can we enjoy memoirs believing them to be true, when nothing, as everyone knows, is so unreliable as memory?" (Robert Winder, cited by David Shields in *Reality Hunger*, 26). Since Berlin has presented her struggle as an alcoholic woman as fiction instead of non-fiction, she has sidestepped the rules and regulations of truth telling and therefore any critique of her memories not being 'true'. I wish to sidestep all those rules, regulations and critiques of memoir myself: Says Lehman: "Technical arguments about what can or cannot be done in nonfiction hit dead ends because they normally are obsessed by the *taxonomy* of narrative rather than by its *power*" (59). If critics are obsessed with accuracy, they are missing the point. "The job of writing memoir is to find one's truth, not to determine the accuracy of what happened... The memoirist, instead, both recounts an event and muses upon it" (Murdoch, 12). Fiction in memoirs of women with alcohol problems is particularly imperative because of the nature of having an addiction to alcohol. When signaled well, incorporation of fiction can imagine moments for which there is no memory. Alcoholic women who have experienced blackouts simply cannot remember

segments of their lives so they may need to fill them in: “This book might sound like a satire of memoir. I’m writing about events I can’t remember. But I remember so much about those blackouts. The blackouts leveled me, and they haunt me still. The blackouts showed me how powerless I had become. The nights I can’t remember are the nights I can never forget” (Hepola, 23). To focus solely on historical accuracy would be, for these women, impossible. The power of their narrative would be lost to the taxonomy of it.

There is of course an important link between chronology and truth in memory, “But because these events are not happening in present time, we have to use our imagination to reclaim them. So we never separate the remembered event from our imagination. They stick together” (Murdoch, 13). We see the memoirist able to make connections that they couldn’t in the past. The memoirist is writing of the ‘then’ in the ‘now’ and this is always evident when reading a memoir. It is not a diary. Therefore the ‘truth’ is always distorted by what the memoirist knows ‘now’ as opposed to what they knew ‘then’. The present is a lens through which the memoirist examines their past, adding judgment, critique, evaluation of themselves and their actions. Therefore we simply must accept that “most memoirists are unreliable narrators” (Steinberg, 144). We must also accept, however, that the memoirist’s ‘unreliability’ is an important element of their narrative power.

The importance of unreliability, or at least of the memoirist not being constrained to a technical pursuit of ‘truth’, is particularly important in the context of women with alcohol problems. As previously mentioned, the issue of some ‘blackout’ incidents or

periods makes accurate recall, at least in the first person, impossible all of the time. More significantly, however, the memoirist needs to be able to lend emotional weight to their narrative. The point of their memoirs is to serve as a warning, or an inspiration, or an apology. In “The Whole Truth,” Peter Ives explains: “These are vivid and honest memories. But I would never swear to them as facts. They are honest and true only in that this is how I remember them” (149). Memoirists are open about their inability to remember and signal to the reader their lack of memory: “I don’t know what month I began picking up another bottle on my way home” (Dowsett-Johnston, 13), “I don’t remember exactly when; this sort of thing happened all the time” (Knapp, 21). The reader is forgiving, after all they cannot remember everything about their own lives either. There is always tension between fact and fiction. These shadows are the point of memoir. They are the places that need to be explored in order for women with alcohol problems to make discoveries and connections.

Conclusion

Memoir is a way to tell a story that might not otherwise be told from someone who might otherwise not be heard. Female memoirists use techniques such as characterisation, chronology, metaphor and intimate detail to tell their story of being alcoholics in a particular time and place. Without our stories how can we understand our problem? The exploration of women’s alcoholism from a personal perspective allows the reader to see the larger political issue of women and alcohol in a more intimate way

and as a real issue attached to real lives. Hence the need for more women's memoirs of alcohol abuse, particularly within a New Zealand cultural context. Intimate creative non-fiction stories of New Zealand women with alcohol problems will provide valuable insight into a larger problematic social issue.

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PART TWO: SHE'S A LUSH - A MEMOIR

Drunk

I was drunk when my father died. I tried really hard not to drink. I hadn't drunk a drop of alcohol for 200 long days. The whole time I was trying, from when he went into hospital breathless and my mum was worried about him. I didn't drink when he coughed and coughed and coughed in the hospital bed on the ward and it looked like he'd never stop. I didn't drink on the day he went into ICU and they put the claustrophobic mask onto his face and it suctioned, pressing his cheeks down hard. I could see the fear in his eyes. Dad raised his arm to me.

“He doesn't like the mask,” I told them.

Dad nodded at me, grateful.

“Can you take it off him?” I asked.

Dad nodded at me again. I was saying all the right things, communicating for him when he could not.

“We need to try with the mask before we try with the breathing tube. If we put him under, it adds complications that we want to avoid.”

Put him under what? Put him under where? I wasn't in charge here and Dad looked at me, disappointed. I knew he just wanted to go to sleep. He was tired.

“You can do it,” I encouraged him as I grabbed his hand, “Just try with the mask.” He turned his head away from me.

Not many people cope with that type of oxygen mask but Dad breathed with it on for over 12 hours, on the bed, with one nurse stationed looking on at him – only him. He didn’t have to share her. She watched him all night. None of us were there. I can’t bear that thought now. The next morning they wouldn’t let us into ICU. All the other families were allowed in two by two but not us. We had to wait. I assembled my scarf into a makeshift pillow and lay back on the bench seats, not separated by armrests because they know you’ll need to lie down. Zachary, my youngest brother – the baby, handsome, six foot three and covered in tattoos with a long beard – sat with his arms folded. My other younger brother Glen – clean shaven and handsome too with a puffed out chest – paced, then sat down and then stood up and paced and then sat down and stood up again. Mum looked at her phone and texted everyone she knew. What was happening? I’ve never been good at waiting. “Be patient,” my dad always said to me. So I was patient. Patience, after all, is a virtue.

They’d put him under. They’d had to do it quickly, they said. We hadn’t been there. It had been a bit touch and go. He was under now. We could go and see him.

I didn’t drink when they called the first family meeting to tell us things weren’t looking too good. I didn’t drink when my mother cried. I didn’t drink when my brothers cried. I didn’t drink after the second meeting when they said things were looking even worse than before but something broke in me at the third meeting. We all sat in a circle (much like you do at an AA meeting) except this was a family room with a box of

tissues on a side table. A room especially reserved for giving bad news. I could feel the old bad news sticking to the walls and lingering in the air. The flickering fluorescent lights were overbearing. A doctor we had never met before came in to talk to us. He was good looking but had sticky outy ears.

“I’m afraid the rest of Peter’s internal organs are now failing along with his lungs. You should go home and get some rest tonight then come back tomorrow at 10.30. We will take the breathing tube out then and let nature take its course.”

Really? The doctor could at least try and be creative.

“We will make sure he is comfortable and doesn’t feel any pain.”

“We know you’ve done your very best,” my mother said to the team and her voice cracked.

Then I laughed.

“Sorry,” I said, “I always laugh in awkward situations.”

The laugh was the sound of something breaking in me, it’s just that no one else knew that.

My excuse for going to the supermarket across the road from my parent’s house was that I needed tampons. Who would deny me a visit to the supermarket for them? I hugged the bottle of red wine to my chest. I chose a Shiraz because I like the fizzy bite of a Shiraz on my tongue.

“Don’t drink,” my husband, Henry, said when he saw the bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag under my arm, “Your dad wouldn’t want you to.”

But what could he say, really? My dad dying was a pretty good reason to need a drink. The first sip was delightful. I drank the whole bottle and then some of my brother's bourbon.

What would I do without my husband to tell me the story of my own self when I'm in a blackout? According to him, I vomited in the bed and when he came into the bedroom (always that same spare bedroom at my parent's house), he could smell it. I know I vomited in the bed because I could see the evidence the next day: the stripped bed, the bags taken to the cleaners, the washing machine with chunks in it that I had to pick out by hand. My husband tells me that he gently coaxed me out of bed and got me into the shower, told me to wash my hair. But in the dark recesses of my mind, I'm sure I can hear his tone echoing and it is not gentle. It is harsh and mean and he is rough as he wraps me in my towel. I can't prove this though because I was not "there." And if I was not there, then where was I?

The phone rang at 1am when I was out of the shower and asleep on the couch.

"We've got to go," Mum raced around waking everyone up.

"Mariana, get up!"

There was no response from me.

"I'll get her there," Henry told my mother.

"Who let her drink?" my mum shouted as she slammed the door on her way out to the car.

My husband was true to his word and got me up.

"Get up. We need to go. Your dad's dying."

“I know that.”

“No, he’s dying now. You need to get up.”

“He’s dying tomorrow.”

“He’s dying NOW. Get up!”

I remember my feet on the linoleum floor (stepping, stepping, stepping, stepping) on the way to ICU through the A&E entrance, a longer walk than the one I was used to. That thick orange line seemed never ending. I walked with my arms crossed. I remember saying goodbye to Dad and touching his soft hair. I remember his last breath and the colour he went once he was gone – a colour I had never seen before. I remember the thudding pain in my heart.

When I woke up in the morning my father was dead and I had a headache.

The Throne

As I embarked on this project, I thought I would write from the perspective of being sober. I even began on the blank page with: “As I write this, I am 157 days sober...” But this is not how things have ended up. Because I am not sober. I do not belong to the club of women who have beaten the drink and lived to tell the tale. Vivian Gornick said: “When Thomas De Quincey wrote *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, he led his readers to believe that his addiction was behind him; he was taking opium when he wrote the book and continued to take it for the next thirty years.”⁷ I will have to be more truthful than Thomas. I had originally planned to sit on my throne, or my high horse or whatever, and hand out advice on how I quit drinking alcohol and how my life is so much better for it. I was going to give women readers handy tips, ‘How Tos’ and words of wisdom, facts and anecdotes, ideas of things to do instead of drinking. But I can’t do that because I still drink. My throne is my large couch, late at night, sitting in the corner nestling a drink in my hands. The jewels on my throne are the ice in my gin reflecting the yellow of a lemon. This book was going to be about the present and the future but instead I have to look back.

A few years before my grandmother died, she went through all her things. She burnt love letters from my grandfather. She got rid of stuff like old newspaper clippings

⁷ Gornick cited in Shields 15

and books she didn't need and other documents. She did this so that when she left the world, no one would find out anything about her that she didn't want them to know.

“Why don't you want anyone to know things?” My seventeen year old self asked her.

“Because there are things I prefer to keep to myself.”

What secrets could this dainty, impeccably dressed, independent woman possibly have?

“I would have liked to read your love letters.”

She chuckled, “Should we go and get some biscuits and tea?”

“Okay.” I could always be distracted by food.

I knew she had burnt everything she didn't want us to find because she told me. Yet there was something she had missed. As we cleaned out the house the day after her funeral, after I'd run my fingers over her dresser and her plush pink, velvet curtains and sat on the stool where she brushed her hair, I found a letter in the back of her wardrobe. She had written to her sister and never sent the letter. It was haphazardly folded behind a box with hats in it (my grandmother had beautiful hats). I read it, this personal letter, then I put it in my handbag and burnt it when I got home. I forgot what it said – for her. I understand why she burnt everything. I understand why we don't want to keep our memories and why we don't want other people to find our memories. I don't want to go back to my own memories. I don't want to dive into my memory and dredge up old anger and past issues. I don't want anyone to know these things about myself. I don't even want to know these things about myself – that's why I've made such an effort to

forget them. I don't want everyone to know that I drink and that I drink too much and I don't want them to know why I drink. I don't want everyone to know that I'm not perfect.

And, it turns out that I don't have any advice. But I do have questions.

What do Women Want?

“What do women want?” asked Erica Jong in her book of essays – answering with four categories: power, sex, bread and roses. The exploration of feminine life has consistently been a source of interest and inspiration for me. But my question, over the last few years, has become: “Why do women drink?” And why is it so normal to do so? Erica Jong’s novels, *Fear of Flying*, *How to Save Your Own Life* and *Parachutes and Kisses* spoke eloquently about feminine life: power, sex, bread and roses; always containing crisp Pinot Gris for our heroine (or anti-heroine if you wish). Her stories always contained Pinot Gris until, that is, I read her book *Fear of Dying*, only to discover that Erica Jong was in the programme – AA. I gasped. But Erica Jong loves white wine and alcoholic beverages in her hot tub or in front of her fireplace! Or should I say, Isadora Wing or Candida Wong loves white wine in these locations (I always confuse the speaker with the poet and shall continue to do so I expect). How could Erica/Isadora/Candida give up her late night drink with a lover? How could she, of all people, of all women, be an alcoholic? The glamorous sipping of cold white wine, so vividly described I could almost feel it, had taken a dark turn. Just as my own drinking has taken a dark turn.

The reality is that I am scared. I am scared every day that I will drink. I am scared that red wine is filling up in the garage below me, filling all the pipes in my house, ready to come up through the plug holes like the blood in Stephen King’s ‘It.’ But

I'm also excited. I'm excited for the moment when I weaken and have a drink. I am excited for the time when something bad happens and I just say, "Fuck it," and drive to the supermarket, buy red wine, put the glass to my lips and sip. Because I love red wine and if I'm not drinking it, I miss it. In her memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*, Caroline Knapp says "Yes: this is a love story" and I relate so intensely to that phrase. When I give up red wine, I am giving up my best friend, my safety blanket, my courage, my shoulder to cry on, my one and only coping mechanism. Then I am alone. It's not so easy to say good-bye, even when your friend turns out to be a frenemy or your lover becomes nasty.

I think what women want is *more*. I want more. More, more, more. More power, more sex, more bread, more roses. I want more of life – more love, more sights, more smells, more things (and bodies) to touch and sometimes it seems as if I want more of the heartbreak – more nastiness, more bitterness, more pain, more tears. It's the yearning feeling that comes up when I write about my drinking, the wanting and the wanting and the wanting and even when I have a glass in my hand the thinking: More! More! More! I will have another and another and another and another until I am so full up I am satisfied. But I never seem to be satisfied.

Blackout

“There was something fundamentally wrong about losing the narrative of my own life.”⁸

- Sarah Hepola

To blackout. To be out in the black. To lose all memories. To wake up and not know what happened. To live and yet not remember you have lived. To be awake but also asleep. To be alive but also dead. Experiencing a blackout can be like looking at a small number of photographs in your mind and trying to piece them together to make a coherent story. After Dad died, I didn't need to look at the photographs in my mind because I had taken real photographs. The day following his death, people came out of nowhere, like ants. I couldn't face them. I couldn't even get dressed. How was I supposed to go downstairs and speak to people I hadn't seen in ages when I didn't even have the energy to put a bra on? In order to distract myself from my life and my splitting headache and my dead Dad, I scrolled through my phone – Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. Then I happened to look at the images on my camera roll. I was stunned to find pictures of my dead father, pictures of his face, pictures of his leg, pictures of his hand, pictures of my brothers crying, pictures of the nurse handing us a sheet of paper (what did the sheet of paper say?) pictures of my mother looking down at him. I had taken over twenty of them. Even though it hurt to see the photographs, I was grateful to

⁸ Hepola 23

my drunk self because I needed to see them. After all, I hadn't really been there. I had been out in the black. I needed to see the tallest of my younger brothers, Zachary, looking at Dad bereft. I needed to see him with his arm around Mum. I needed to see my other brother Glen, clasping Dad's shoulder with his jaw set tightly. I needed to see Mum saying goodbye. I needed proof that he had all of us around his bed and he was not alone when he went. I needed to see all of it.

Dad didn't believe in God. So if he didn't believe in God and he hadn't gone to heaven (or hell), then where was he? Was he in the same place that I went when I blacked out? Was he in the middle, the in between? Was he the moth that flitted in the dusty light and pestered my brother during his funeral? Where was he?

A day or two after he died, his body was in the lounge in a coffin made of wood you could draw on. I don't know how his body ended up there in that coffin with those clothes on because I had nothing to do with any of it. I didn't visit the funeral homes to see which one was best. I didn't look at any brochures of coffins with metal handles, light wood, dark wood, shiny finish or matt. Glen and Zachary went with Mum to do it all. I couldn't. When the funeral director came to the house I looked out the window.

"Are you going to come and sit at the table with us, Mariana?" Mum asked gently.

I shook my head and sat on the chaise lounge, my head facing away from all of them.

The Welsh bring their dead home. On the coffin, I painstakingly drew plants in pots with black vivid. I don't know why. I drew twenty of them – cacti, wisteria, mother-in-law's tongue, rubber plant, ivy, maidenhair fern.

The house smelt like a dead body and new carpet. The week before, new carpet had been put down. This is how unexpected his death was. While he was in hospital, the worn, cream carpet that had red wine spilled on it and dog's piss on it and cat's vomit on it and all his footprints on it was pulled up and a new, plush, dark carpet was put down.

“Is this a good time to be doing this?” I asked Mum.

“It will be nice for Dad when he gets home.” She was so sure.

I wasn't. “This house is huge. There's so much furniture to move.”

“We need to paint the house too before the new carpet gets put down.”

“What the fuck?”

“Don't swear please.”

“Are you crazy? We can't paint this whole house and move all the furniture while Dad is in hospital.”

“Yes we can.”

And we did. We painted the whole interior of the house – my Mum, my brothers, my brother's wife and his two kids (six and four years old), my cousin, me, Henry and my daughter, Lily. We wanted it to be nice for when Dad got home.

On the Tuesday of the carpet laying, I forgot the carpet was being put down. I was upstairs in the spare room in my bra and knickers getting ready to go to the hospital when a man appeared at my door.

“Oh my God!” he said.

“Oh my God!” I said.

He backed away. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realise anyone was here.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t meant to be here.”

I wasn’t meant to be there. I was meant to be at home with Henry and Lily, getting ready to go to work, feeding my dog and cat. Not here in this room by myself getting ready for the fifth or so day in a row to head into the hospital.

I looked down at the clothes I had in my hands and started to put them on quickly. How could I forget the carpet was being put down? The furniture had all been moved into the bathroom so I had been standing in a room with only a bed in it and now some stranger had seen me in my underwear. I laughed – then left the house quickly so as to avoid making any further eye contact.

“Dad,” I said quietly into his ear when I arrived at ICU, “The carpet guy saw me in my bra and undies this morning.”

Nothing. Not a flitter of an eyelid. Not a squeeze of my hand. Had he not heard?

“Did you hear me? The carpet guy walked in on me in my undies.”

Nothing.

My dad would have found this so funny. Who was this guy, just lying there with a tube down his throat? Why wasn’t he laughing? Where was my dad?

Rat in a Cage

“Whenever a thing is done for the first time, it releases a little demon.”⁹

- Emily Dickinson

I was fourteen when alcohol first reached its warm hand down my throat and spread out its palm in my stomach. My sun-kissed brown hair hung down my back. My hips had widened and my breasts had grown, much to the surprise of everyone, quite large on my small frame. Someone, another teenager with a licence, picked my friends and I up from my wooden house down a cul de sac. At that stage, I got driven all over town by other teenagers. If you wanted a ride you had one. It was as if you clicked your fingers and one appeared, like the pumpkin to take Cinderella to the ball – except it was a beat up Ford Laser driven by a lanky boy with a hat on backwards (it was the nineties). We didn’t even have cell phones yet, but even so the rides would come.

Everywhere in my hometown took less than twenty minutes to get to. The roads were wide and the streetlights guided us. I always felt as if something was calling me but I wasn’t sure what – or who. I had picked my outfit carefully that night. I would wear my new light blue levis, my tight bonds t-shirt and my brown, vinyl jacket. I was innocent. My childhood consisted of barbeques at my parents’ friends’ houses, beach holidays and climbing trees with my younger brothers. I tried alcohol before I tried

⁹ Dickinson (misquoted)

cigarettes, R rated movies or sex. This would be my first time going to a proper party and I wasn't ready.

We drove up the driveway to the house and piled out. I was offered a drink as soon as I walked in the door – Jim Beam and Coke in a yellow, plastic cup with slight chew marks around the edge. We were hanging out with kids two years older than us so I felt nervous. Two years older meant they were cooler by default. The music was loud and a short haired, brown, mongrel dog lay on the carpet looking hungry. The girl whose party it was said her mum was at her boyfriend's house and we had the place to ourselves for the night. I wanted to go home. My parents would be watching the TV together and my little brothers would be in their pyjamas. Instead of going home, I drank and laughed and joined in. The lure of my peers was always stronger than the lure of home.

How was I to know when to stop? Who had ever taught me to stop? My sixteen year old friend whispered in my ear with wet teenaged lips and rolled cigarette breath, "Don't drink too much." But how much was too much? I did find out how much too much was. Oh yes I did. At some point in the night I passed out. The next day I woke up smelling of vomit, still in my clothes, an orange stain on my Bonds t-shirt and it was all a joke.

"Haha, so funny how you spewed in your hair."

"You were so funny last night."

"Yeah, real crack up."

I was ashamed. I felt sick. Why was I being congratulated? I didn't want to be the fool. I didn't feel proud and I didn't want to be the centre of attention or conversation. I wanted to go home.

Sometimes, people think that if you have a bad experience you won't want to repeat it. But I repeated that experience of drinking too much again and again and again – over and over and over a thousand times. Like a rat in a cage that never learns its lesson, I kept getting electrocuted. Because something happened that night that no one else saw. It was when I looked in the mirror of the bathroom of the single mum who wasn't home, the dirty sink beneath me and the dog whining at the door that I realised: “I am beautiful.” It was the first time I had ever felt this way. I had always felt fat or ugly or shy or stupid or lonely or afraid. Alcohol took all that away and I felt great – better than great, I felt whole, complete, *enough*. The vomit in my hair and the headache the next day was worth those few minutes of the complete comfort I felt in my own skin.

Family Ties

“Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, that anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscap.”¹⁰

- Vladimir Nabokov

Even though I fell in love with alcohol for the first time when I was fourteen, it was always around before that. I don’t remember a time when it wasn’t there. One of my earliest memories is walking home from an afternoon barbeque with my grandparents on the footpathless, winding roads of Korokoro. It was early evening and the sun was beginning to set. My grandfather, wearing a white polo shirt and light brown slacks couldn’t walk straight, fell down a bank and struggled to climb back up. I must have been four years old. I could tell my grandmother was angry despite her best efforts to hide it and it was frustrating to watch a grown man try and climb up a relatively simple bank but struggle to do so. Grandma grabbed my hand as we watched the show. We looked down at him, hand in hand, our shadows falling down the bank also, as he climbed a few steps and then rolled back down. He was around six foot with a long arm’s reach but couldn’t co-ordinate his body to do the climbing.

¹⁰ Nabokov 14

“You can do it, Grandad.” I encouraged him.

“Grandad’s just feeling a bit tired this afternoon,” she said to me quietly.

“No he’s not,” I replied. “He’s drunk.”

What could she do but laugh? The point of this story is that I knew the word drunk when I was four, yet I came from a loving, stable (wealthy!), caring family. I lived in a beautiful house on a hill with a pool and a view of the sea. My parents tucked my brothers and I into bed at night and read me a story. I was loved and my family was good.

I have a memory of my slim dad, wearing his work suit, passed out on the bathroom floor. It was the time of day when the sky had changed colour, trying to make its way into night. Our bathroom had a soft, green carpet. I loved the feel of it under my bare feet. My mother flew around the house, cleaning and yelling at my dad as he lay groaning on the floor with his belt buckle undone after going to the toilet. My brother and I jumped on him to try and wake him up. I picked up his lip and pulled it out. He did nothing. What else could we do to his face without a reaction, we wondered. I pulled on his eyebrow hairs. There was a small reaction of a scrunched up nose. My brother pried his eyelids open. We giggled. I stuck my finger up one of his nostrils. This game continued until we got bored and went to do something else. Perhaps the reason this memory is so vivid is because this behaviour was uncharacteristic of my father in front of us. I do know that this aspect of my father’s life was evident far more to my mother than to us children and that the word “migraine” was often used in place of “hangover.” It transpired years later that a friend had to drive my mother to the hospital when she

was in labour with my younger brother, Zachary, because my dad was too drunk to take her. She gave birth alone with only the midwife for support. Dad turned up pissed at some point to meet his new son and the midwife was rude to Mum because dad fell asleep in a chair. He couldn't be woken and visiting hours had ended.

“He needs to leave.”

Mum, tired, sore and in bed resting, tried to call out to wake Dad up but he was out to it.

“Wake him up.” The midwife demanded. This was the same midwife who had provided little support during the birth other than sharp barks of instruction.

“He's fast asleep.”

“I can see that. What are you going to do about it?”

Luckily my mum is not a pushover. “You wake him up if you've got a problem with him being there or get the hell out,” she said “and let me get some rest. I'm bloody tired. I've just had a baby.”

But the damage was done. Mum's feelings were hurt and my mum is like an elephant. She doesn't forget.

“She made me feel like dirt,” Mum told me, “and it wasn't my fault he was drunk.”

Some weekend days, our normally playful, involved dad couldn't come out of the darkened bedroom because of his “migraine.” There was an undercurrent of almost invisible but still tangible anger in our home that seeped out of Mum towards Dad but it wasn't until I was older that I knew why. My mother never drinks and up until his death

my father was still not “allowed” to drink. He could have one or two beers before my mother swooped in to tell him that’s enough. It was like he owed her something for some reason. And maybe he did. Just like I owe my husband.

Or maybe, I’m paying my husband back.

My mum’s friend Pam was a lady we went camping with every summer along with her husband and two kids. Pam drank whiskey and coke in her glass sitting outside on her camp chair while the late sun still shone and we were all still sandy from the beach. She had another whiskey and coke in her caravan which she topped up and drank in secret. Us kids saw her do so while we were in the caravan playing cards but the other adults didn’t know she had two drinks on the go and we knew to stay quiet. Every now and then, after spending time with Pam, my mother would comment, “Pam’s got a drinking problem.” We lived down a free-range cul-de-sac with a gully at the end. We were number 3 and Pam, number 19. Her daughter, Amy, was my friend. We played and swam in their bright blue para pool then lay on the driveway in our togs so that when we stood up we had made wet shadows of ourselves.

Pam would sit on her couch smoking and drinking wine. She had thick, dark hair that she liked to brush, dark brown eyes and olive skin. She was sweet to me and made me laugh. I grew up around her. She knew when I got my first period. She met every single boyfriend I ever had. When my own mother drove me mad as a teenager, I would go around to her peaceful house, relax, watch the smoke exhaled from her mouth curl in the air and she would offer me a cigarette and a glass of wine which I always

accepted. What began as a friendship with her daughter turned into a friendship with Pam and after we moved away from our town, I would still go back and visit Pam through my university years and after I had my daughter. Pam died at age 55 after drinking two bottles of wine and taking sleeping pills before bed. She never got to see her daughter get married and she never got to meet her four grandchildren. Sometimes I dream about her.

The Blood of Christ

The hype was palpable. We would get to eat the body of Christ and drink the blood of Christ. No longer did we have to suffer through Maths and P.E, our days were devoted to prepping for our First Communion. Almost all of us in Mrs London's class would be doing it. And we needed to be ready. I'd been baptised. Thank God my parents had had the foresight to baptise me otherwise I'd be like poor Vicky who got to do none of this and had to go and sit with the Standard One kids every time we worked on our preparation. She was officially a social pariah now.

I'd done my Confession where I'd confessed the sins of being mean to my brothers and made up an even better sin because being mean to my brothers didn't seem very impressive.

In the dark of the confessional I announced: "I killed a Cat."

The Priest coughed, "Pardon me, dear?"

"I killed a cat."

This was a great sin. He must've been so impressed.

I got a ton of Our Fathers and Hail Marys as repentance.

Oh the dress! It fit perfectly over my eight year old body. A tight bodice with a skirt that poofed out and bobbed in the air as I twirled. I had never seen, let alone owned, such a beautiful dress. I didn't really care about God or Heaven, but I really cared about the

dress and the ritual. I would taste the bread. What would it taste like? I wanted to drink the wine from the silver goblet. God how I loved that goblet. I wanted to touch it, to keep it and take it home. I wanted to drink the blood of Christ from it every single night. I imagined drinking from it at my brown, formica dinner table, the kind of table you could make longer when you had more guests coming around. That goblet would sit perfectly on my table.

Church had been boring up until this point because whenever the communion came out I had to sit there and wait while the long line wound its way around the aisles and all I could do was sit quietly moving my legs back and forth without banging them on the wooden pew in front of me. Not anymore! Now I would be in that line.

The day arrived and I put on my dress after breakfast so as not to spill anything on the crisp whiteness. The many greens of our garden provided the back drops for the photographs. I had some by myself, some with my little brothers, then a faceless photographer magically appeared to take some of the whole family. I don't remember who took those photos because they were not important. It was me that was important that day.

After the photos I went into my parents' bedroom to look at myself in the mirror from every single angle possible. The mirror stretched from floor to ceiling and took up parts of two walls. As their bedroom was at the dark end of the house, there always seemed to be a lamp on which provided a moody glow. My bored, four year old brother watched the show.

“Why are you wearing that dress?” he asked me.

“Because I’m getting married to Jesus.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m asking Mum. Muuummmm, is Mariana getting married to Jesus?”

“What? No. Go and put your shoes on. We have to leave soon.”

The word *shoes* floating down the hallway reminded me of my own. How could I have forgotten to have another look at them? I lifted one high into the air and placed it on my parents’ blue and yellow flowered duvet. My shoes were as white as the leaf of the most pure of daisies and the heel was the sweetest heel in existence.

We lined up on the church steps for a photo. The wind was starting to get up and rogue hard leaves were starting to fall, one of which landed just by my foot. I stood on it. It would be time soon. We already knew our groups so we gathered instinctively towards them. When we heard our names in the special song, we stood at the back of the church. Then when the music played for our bit it was time to walk forward.

“Mariana, Ben, Matthew and Lisa. Will you come and follow me now? Will you come and be Apostles of Mine? Will you come and follow me now?”

We walked slowly, in time like we had practised. Right foot first, four abreast down the aisle. All attention was on us.

“Yes, Lord, yes. Yes Lord Yes. Yes Lord we will come and follow you. We will come and follow you now.”

My hands were in the exact right position, which I knew they would be after all the practice I’d done walking round my house with them clasped demurely in front of

me. As I reached the dowdy old lady offering up Jesus, I raised my palms in the most angelic of poses.

“The Body of Christ.”

She placed the round bit of Jesus in my palms.

“Amen,” I said then with my right hand I picked it up and ate it – not too greedily.

It was the texture of cardboard and stuck to the roof of my mouth. How was I going to shift that off of there? Moving on to the actual priest who had the blood, I swished my tongue around furiously to break up the coating. The priest stood tall with the white cloth draped over his arm. This Priest incidentally was the same priest that lived on site at our school and hung his washing on his line which consisted of his robes, white singlets and black g-string underwear that we used to compete to steal.

“The blood of Christ.”

“Amen.”

He stooped down to give me the silver goblet and tipped it slightly. My mouth opened like a bird’s beak. It reached my lips as he tipped. He pulled it back too quickly. Not a drop of wine had entered my gullet. I felt a panic rise inside me as the silver goblet drew further away from my face.

“I didn’t get any.”

“Pardon, dear?”

I said it louder, “I didn’t get any.”

“Move along dear.”

“I DIDN’T GET ANY OF THE BLOOD.”

A teacher’s arm appeared out of nowhere to move me along.

“I didn’t get any.” I told her. She’d understand. She’d been there for the build up. She’d know how much it meant to me.

“Sshh!”

I was in trouble with my mother after the ceremony and I couldn’t quite figure out why.

“I didn’t get any blood!” I told her.

“Yes, but you didn’t need to shout about it.”

What did she expect me to do? I was angry. This isn’t fair, I thought.

“You’re not even old enough for wine.”

Was she stupid? “It wasn’t wine! It was blood! AND I DIDN’T GET ANY!”

“You can go to your room if you’re going to act like this.”

I never did my Confirmation.

Maiden

“We can’t pinpoint a moment when we learned that nakedness could not go on, the moment when we looked down at our body and saw what it was.”¹¹

- Ashleigh Young

As a little girl, I loved stick on decorations – placing the jewels on my ear lobes as earrings. I loved curling up in corners reading books, climbing trees, hanging out with my brothers. I loved the smell of my best friend’s house when I went to visit her and I loved her bright yellow jacket. I loved stationery and writing. I loved the pine tree forest next to my house that I could get lost in. I was a free range kid with a mother who said, “Go outside and play.” Women are supposed to be maidens from birth until motherhood but in my mind it is separated into three distinct sub-groups. Girlhood, adolescence and womanhood before motherhood – if one chooses to become a mother.

Girlhood is often taken from us before we are ready with the onset of adolescence. A friend of mine told me about getting her period on the day before her tenth birthday. She wasn’t ready and she felt she couldn’t be a kid anymore. She was at school and they were playing softball on the field in bare feet. The teacher took her aside and she didn’t know why. She was whisked to the medical room where she saw that

¹¹ Young 15

blood had trickled down her leg and onto her grubby foot. She was sent home because she needed to change her pants. She felt she had done something wrong.

The creep of adolescent feelings started in me at around ten, before my breasts started to bud and any hair grew underneath my armpits. My mind didn't feel quite right.

"I'm sad and I don't know why," I told my mother.

"Go outside and play," she said.

I'm sad and I don't know why, I wrote in my diary.

Something was shifting. I became conscious of my body, the shape of my legs. Was I fat? The way my stomach rolled when I sat down. I didn't want to get undressed in front of anyone in my house anymore. My brothers continued to get dressed into their pyjamas in front of the heater after their night-time baths but I did not. I retreated to my room for privacy. I would come out of the shower wrapped in a towel with my shoulders slightly hunched. There, in the safety of my room, I could take off my towel and not worry about anybody looking. About anybody seeing. But one day, when I was about eleven, after I removed my towel and began my getting ready for bed routine – piling my hair on top of my head to dry, moisturising my legs and arms, getting my pyjamas organised, I saw there was a wiggling lump in my bed. I pulled the covers back and there was my little brother, Zachary.

"Mum!" I screamed as I yanked the towel off my head and put it back around my body. "Zachary is hiding in my room!"

Mum's footsteps came down the hall and she opened the door.

“Why are you hiding in here Zach?”

“I wanted to see her boobies.”

“Get out of here!” she said and tried to smack his bum on the way out but he was too quick. “You give Mariana her privacy,” she yelled after him down the hall.

She turned back to me and threw her arms up in the air, “Sorry darling.”

“That’s okay.”

“He’s only six.”

“Yeah I know.”

She gave me a hug.

I got my period on the day of my jazz ballet exam. I was twelve. We were in a rush because I had to be picked up from school, race home so my mother could french plait my hair and I could get into my leotard then go to the exam venue. When I got home from school I went to the toilet.

“Mum!” I yelled.

“What?”

There was blood in my knickers. It wasn’t the colour I expected. I remember the surprise. It wasn’t like the blood that ran down my leg when I fell over and scraped my knee. It was a deeper red and the blood was thicker.

“I think I’ve got my period.”

“Let me see,” she pushed open the door and I showed her.

“Yes you do.”

She got me a pad and a fresh pair of knickers.

“I can’t do the exam,” I said.

“Yes you can.”

“No I can’t. We’re not allowed to wear knickers under our leotard.”

“No one will notice.”

At Founders Theatre, downstairs in the bowels of the building, there were rooms to prepare and once it was time we would go up the stairs and along the hall into the light of the exam room. Dancing girls and their mothers congregated in the rooms that stank of hairspray. We were all probably high.

“Mariana got her period today for the first time,” Mum whispered to the other mothers.

“Stop telling everyone, Mum!”

“Sorry.”

We had to have numbers pinned on our backs. We walked up the stairs in a line. At the door to the exam room, we were checked by our teacher. Was our hair perfect? Were our numbers pinned on straight? The girls in front of me were let in. I was stopped.

“Why are you wearing knickers?”

I froze.

“You will need to go and take them off.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can. Go and take them off in the bathroom.”

I balked but managed to get out, “I got my period for the first time today so...”

“Oh. Okay.” My teacher had to discuss this with another lady. They reached a conclusion.

“You can go in.”

I went in and danced with my perfect hair and my straight numbers and my period.

It's our Culture

*"Everything you're sure is right can be wrong in another place."*¹²

- Barbara Kingsolver

I turned eighteen in the spring of 2000. The year prior to that was the year in New Zealand when the drinking age was lowered from twenty years old to eighteen. Wasn't I lucky? I wore jeans and a short pink singlet. The bus arrived at school and my friends were waiting in the concrete area out the front. In my memory, my whole high school seems to be concrete but I know it was made of other materials like cheap wood and laminate and linoleum and grass.

"Happy Birthday!!" My friends all fussed over me. We had started to fuss over each other at birthdays over the last couple of years.

"We've got a surprise for you," Charlotte (tall and olive with a large Jewish nose) said.

"Really?" I was excited.

"Really. Yes." Julia (gap toothed with an hourglass figure. She had grey hairs already but all the guys wanted to fuck her) confirmed.

"We'll meet you at the park at interval," said Morgan (buxom, with thick dark hair and skin the shade of a pale doll's; she was always paranoid about her pimples).

"Okay."

¹² Kingsolver 572

I went to Science and Statistics before the bell rang for morning tea and then I left school to go to the park. There my friends were waiting. Julia had a red mini which was parked in the carpark. It was our main form of transport for the year. Charlotte, who I had posed half naked for the day before in the style of Man Ray in the school dark-room, had a scarf which she put around my eyes and tied at the back of my head.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see,” Morgan said.

We got in the car and I was blindly driven somewhere while we listened to our favourite tape on the stereo and sang along, badly.

The car came to a stop about five minutes later and I was led into a room. I could tell by the way the light dimmed. I could smell beer and cigarettes. My blindfold was removed and we were at The Hilly – our local pub.

“We’re going to buy you your first legal beer.”

“Yay!”

We sat at the long, thick wooden table with wooden bench seats and ordered a couple of jugs. I can still taste that Hilly beer, watery but delicious. They didn’t even ask for our ID.

We should have been in school but we missed third period, then lunch, then fourth and fifth period as we drank the afternoon away at The Hilly. The mini dropped me home later in the evening. It was an easy day. A day where I didn’t have responsibilities. A day where I went home and my room was my own teenage salvation,

away from the house slightly, a carpeted, fully functional sleepout. A place I could hide things. A place I could be me.

It's just so normal to drink. But it wasn't always this way. In Aotearoa, "alcohol was unknown to pre-European Maori"¹³ and "the tangata whenua were wary of the waipiro, or rotten water, that came with the visitors."¹⁴ I read this late at night while trying to learn, learn, learn about alcoholism and why women drink, which would then help me discover why *I* drink. When I found for the first time that this was once a country without any alcohol, I had a moment of peace inside. A land without alcohol? Really? It never occurred to me that this was a way of life. So entrenched is alcohol in my own life and the lives of those around me that I simply cannot imagine New Zealand without it but, prior to European settlers, that's exactly the way it was. Clearly, it's not like that any longer. In Antonia Lyon and Sara Willott's New Zealand study, which focused on conversations about alcohol with friendship groups, it was found that drinking was seen as what New Zealanders 'do': "To be a 'New Zealander' you engage in the behaviour that New Zealanders engage in, which is to go out and have a few drinks (with whomever). Here there is a New Zealand cultural understanding that drinking is 'what you do as a Kiwi', and this is drawn on explicitly in these localised friendship groups to help explain the drinking of the group. The 'naturalness' of drinking in Kiwis works to overshadow any difference in subgroup drinking, such as in women or

¹³ Warren, Griffiths & Huygens 55

¹⁴ Warren, Griffiths & Huygens 56

in specific age groups.”¹⁵ I have come across this attitude many times while attempting to stop drinking. The lines, “Are you pregnant?” and “Just have one” seem to be more commonly used than “please” and “thank-you.”

I can't imagine a New Zealand without alcohol. I can't imagine a campsite near the beach without a late afternoon/early evening drink. I can't imagine the smell of a barbeque without beer and wine mixed in with it. I can't imagine an outdoor festival or concert where they don't serve alcohol. It's got to the point where I can't even imagine a child's birthday party without alcohol being offered to the parents present. Maybe it's because all my friends with young kids are nice, they want to make the other parents feel welcome. God knows that children's birthday parties are the most boring events ever. Maybe it's because they have money, these double income, middle class, educated people. They can afford the presents for their kid AND the party food AND the goodie bags AND extra treats for the parents. Maybe it's because they like a drink or two to wind down on a Saturday. Whatever the reason, it's becoming so normal for me that even on the way to a toddler's party, I have to have my guard up. I have to talk myself down from the drink.

¹⁵ Lyons & Willotts 70

The Blackout Demons

“I do not know

who I was when I did those things”¹⁶

- Adrienne Rich

I have felt at times taken over by an invisible force. As if something or someone else is in control of me. The being that wants me to drink alcohol can often seem very ‘other’. As if they are not me at all but want to take me over, gain control. According to Zahrah Sita, “The word “Alcohol” comes from the Arabic “al-kuhl” which means “Body Eating Spirit”, and is the root origin of the English term for “ghoul”. She speaks of a vision she had: “I became aware of this phenomenon years ago when I was given a spiritual vision. In this vision, I was transported as an observer above a popular bar and nightclub. Above the venue were a variety of ghoulish entities. Inside the bar were people drinking alcohol, socializing, dancing, and so on. I watched as certain people became very drunk. I saw that their souls, while connected through a thread, exited the body. I understood that the soul was leaving the body because of the great discomfort of being in a body highly intoxicated with alcohol. When the soul exited the body, other non-benevolent entities entered or latched on to their vacant shells. Once the entities took hold of the body, they used the body to play out all kinds of dark acts, such as violence, low-level

¹⁶ Rich 195

sexual encounters, destructive behaviors, rape, and more.”¹⁷ This vision of Sita’s disturbed me. Could there be any truth in it? It reminded me of “The Hangover” movies. You know, the ones where they wake up and have to piece together the night before. The character I relate to the most is Stu. He is a normal person who goes about his day doing normal things, then he gets fucked up and does stuff he would never do like pull his own tooth out with pliers and get his face tattooed. He says “There’s a demon in me.”

Mariaba is my demon. I don’t know that bitch. She does shit I would never, ever do and the separation I feel from her is an abyss. Is she a spiritual entity that takes over because my own self cannot handle the toxicity of my alcohol ridden body? I’m not sure but I find the image of bad spirits hanging around above a nightclub waiting to take over people’s bodies strangely fascinating. I thought of this late one evening when I went into Wellington to meet a friend at The Library bar — a dimly lit place that is lined with bookshelves, brown leather sofas and knit cushions. The menu has an array of cocktails that spark the imagination. I ordered a zombie cocktail that came to me in a white skull cup, on fire. After I blew out the flame and took my first sip I looked up to see if they were coming for me.

When I was four I had a friend who was dead. I can’t remember her name but it started with ‘E’. Her hair was long and brown and straggly. She asked me to brush it. It looked pretty once it was brushed. She had lived down the road before she died and her arms were covered in eczema. I knew she was dead but I also knew she was real. She would come and visit me sometimes and we would play in my garden. My house was

¹⁷ Sita www.newagora.ca

safe. It was weatherboard and looked like a doll's house. My mother had painted it white and my father had built a red brick fence which I thought was beautiful. Bad things had happened to 'E'. Bad things she couldn't say out loud but she could show through the way she felt. They were very bad things. I remember the feel of the grass on my legs as we sat together. Sometimes she wouldn't talk, she was just there. Sometimes she wasn't there. Sometimes she wouldn't play and her eyes were always looking down. I knew she couldn't go home but sometimes she did.

“Who are you talking to out there?” Mum asked me.

“My friend.”

“Mariana has an imaginary friend,” she told my dad later. I didn't know what imaginary meant so I thought it must mean dead.

Some people believe that those who have a particularly sensitivity to spiritual phenomena are more susceptible to alcohol, that their spirits are more easily taken.

Envy

Red wine is my drink. Glossy, deep red wine – Pinot Noir, Merlot, Shiraz, Syrah. We all have one, I think. Jim Beam stole my grandfather. When I watched my aunty die in a hospital bed, there was the sneaking thought in my mind: “Did vodka do this?” It was red wine that I threw up all over the dressing table in my parent’s spare room and it was red wine that spilled out of my mouth onto the plush cream carpet. It was my husband that cleaned it up. It was my daughter who heard me retching. It was me that cried but it was red wine that started it.

Not everyone has this twisted relationship with waipiro, the rotten water. So why am I different? I want to be like ‘her’. I want to be like her over there, sipping on her bubbly wine. There are always the ‘hers’ and the ‘shes.’ ‘Her’ eyes don’t stray to the bottle to see how much is left. ‘She’ can put it on the table and leave it there, just twiddling the stem between her thumb and forefinger. Just drink it already, I scream at ‘her’ in my mind. Look at ‘her,’ able to have two drinks and stop at that. Why can’t I be like ‘her’? ‘She’ doesn’t drink like I do. ‘She’ doesn’t want to drink like I do. I have been hypnotised by the bubbles in my drink, watching them move up and up and up (never down). Stick to the sides and pop. I can feel their sweet spray on my nose as I tip the flute back to swallow.

I always get mixed up between jealousy and envy. Jealousy is when you don’t want to share someone close to you with another person and envy is when you want

what someone else has. I am envious of liquor cabinets. Did you know that you can build a liquor cabinet with wooden crates? You can have a stylish, sleek liquor cabinet with wooden framing and a dark coloured glass door that swings without making a noise. You can even get a giant swan whose wing opens to provide all the liquor out of its belly. When I see liquor cabinets, something happens in my throat and mouth. I salivate. I am envious of all those mostly full bottles lined up neatly in rows – all different colours, bottles from around the world purchased duty free, bottles given as presents. I can never have that in my house. I would drink all of it. There would be none left for cocktails for visitors. My swan would have an empty stomach and its wing would remain shut.

There are genetic reasons for my love of alcohol. Not only am I susceptible because I have family members who are alcoholics but “young women with a history of alcoholism also produce more saliva when exposed to alcohol than women without such a history, suggesting a potential for more intense alcohol craving and future alcohol problems.”¹⁸ So that’s the difference then between me and the ‘hers’ and the ‘shes.’ I’m literally salivating at the thought of having a drink, and they’re not.

¹⁸ CASA 5.

Body of Evidence

My body is my temple, my prison, my home, my enemy. The way I feel about my body is confusing. It is strong. It gets me places. It grew my child in its warmth. It is comfortable at the end of a long day, curled up on the couch like a cat. It has held people and children as they've cried. It has looked and touched and felt and tasted and heard and seen. But it has also betrayed me.

Women's bodies "contain less water and have more fatty tissue compared with men of similar sizes. Because alcohol dissolves more in water than in fat, women maintain higher concentrations of alcohol in their blood."¹⁹ Not only can our bodies not process alcohol as effectively as men, the psychological aspect of body image also plays a role in women's drinking. I'm sure there was a time when I didn't notice my own body constantly but I can't remember it. My obsession with my body is probably the result of effective marketing in our consumer culture mixed with the fact that I'm not only a sensitive person but highly visual. How I look is important to me. I can't help it. It just is. Maybe I'm petty or vain, but I'm in this body all day everyday. I feed it, I shower it, I exercise it, I dress it, I look at it and I think about it.

I was once discussing a book that was written by a man from a female perspective with a friend. It was a good book but there was something wrong with it. Something we both couldn't quite put our finger on. It just wasn't right.

¹⁹ CASA, 61

“I know what it is,” she said finally, “He’s written from the perspective of a woman but never once has he mentioned her body. When you are a woman, you are so conscious of your body, you’re aware of it all the time. What do I look like? What do these jeans look like? How does my skin look? There’s a realm of the woman character that he has completely missed and that is how the woman feels in her own body.”

That was it. She had nailed it. I am never not thinking of or aware of my body and how it looks to others. The shape of it, the fatness of it, the angle of it – is a shadow on my mind that doesn’t go away. I have so many ambivalent feelings about it. Growing up, I didn’t want the attention my body gave me. I was shy. I didn’t like being tooted at while I did my paper run in short shorts at twelve years old. I didn’t like men (or boys) staring at my breasts when I wore a bikini or a singlet or anything tight that showed cleavage. I didn’t like people appreciating my body and commenting on it. But I also didn’t like being skimmed over and ignored when there were others deemed more attractive in the nearby vicinity, so I was in a conundrum. I wanted to be beautiful. I tried to be beautiful but I didn’t like the attention or lack of attention I got from my beauty. I never felt good enough. I wasn’t thin enough or beautiful enough or tall enough. I never felt *enough*. I never felt enough, that is, until I was drunk. Then I felt more than enough – confident, fun and free. I felt released from the trappings of my body. I could dance and the awkwardness would not be present. I could jump and forget that my breasts may be bouncing. I could run and forget that from behind someone might be watching the way my buttocks moved. I didn’t care if I didn’t look right. I could move fluidly without embarrassment or fear – that is until the next day when I

would lie curled in the foetal position, rigid with embarrassment and fear from the night before.

In her book *Eating, Drinking, and Overthinking*, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema discusses the toxic triangle of depression, unhealthy eating patterns and heavy drinking in women. This toxic triangle is clearly present in my life. For many years I drank my calories and wouldn't allow myself food in order to reduce the number of calories my body was ingesting. I replaced both dinner and dessert and sometimes lunch, with wine. I felt depressed because I wasn't eating properly. I felt depressed because I was drinking too much so I drank more to make those feelings go away. And around and around I've been on that toxic merry-go-round. Food, depression, alcohol. Each one its own special horse moving up and down, up and down but never really going anywhere.

Vanity is one of the seven deadly sins. Why do I even care about how I look and how much I weigh? I know on an intellectual level that there are more important things to worry about than looks, like hunger and war, but these issues go deeper than an intellectual level. They're ingrained. I can't seem to shake them.

Like the stages of a woman – maiden, mother and crone, the woman's body follows its own course. I hardly remember the time before I had breasts but when they started to grow (I didn't realise, someone else took the liberty to point it out) I remember standing on the bath to climb up onto the bathroom sink so I could get a better look in the skinny mirror that went from sink to ceiling. I didn't have a mirror in my own room so I closed the wooden door to the bathroom and took off all my clothes. I was disgusted at what I saw. The small mounds and my pale skin – it was winter and my welsh tan had

turned back into English rose skin. In my memory now I see a Rembrandt painting of a figure but at the time I didn't feel that way. I felt scared and out of control. Couldn't my body just be mine? Maybe I was afraid of becoming a woman. To be honest, it didn't look that fun. Although, I did want my own set of car keys that I could jangle about while carrying my handbag. However, all the women I knew were tired all the time, or bitter, or old and ugly. This sounds terrible but I didn't have many strong female role models that weren't my mother. There were a couple, one of them being my year one teacher Ms McDonnell who wore scarves and ripped up a book in front of the class because it was sexist. I can still remember the pictures in the book. Sally was cooking with her mother and Paul was outside with his father mowing the lawns. I remember the sound of the rip and the power in her hands, the freckled hands of a red head.

There were actresses and models to look up to, starving women. Angry female musicians provided some lead. The problem was that I was never really that angry. More than anger, I felt yearning. So I played into consumerism's waiting hands. I am an advertiser's dream because I am always wanting. The body I wanted was always slightly out of reach but surely I could buy the body (and life) I wanted if only I had enough money. I was taught that I could have everything. That I could be anything. But that's not really true, is it?

I found my first proper female role model at around nineteen when I read *Fear of Flying*. Erica Jong. She made me realise that being a woman was all at once horrible, powerful, confusing, lustful. The lust I felt over the years had left me ashamed. My quest for orgasm had left me feeling dirty but she made it all okay and from there I

began assembling my building blocks for creating a life. I would make this work. I could make this work. I would use what I had and the body I was given to make the best life I could.

It's my body that tells me not to drink. She doesn't like it. Her head throbs and her mouth goes dry. She speaks to me without words. She speaks to me in feelings. She says stop. She feels heavy and slow the day after drinking. Her sleep hasn't been refreshing, her mind is cloudy, her eyes are sore. She tells me she doesn't want to drink, yet it's her lips that take in the drink, it's her mouth that swallows, it's her throat that the alcohol slides down. I am my body yet I am not her.

The Smell of Him

“How can one write about drinking – or quitting drinking – without addressing wine and romance?”²⁰

- Ann Dowsett-Johnston.

I met Henry when I was seventeen years old and we were living in Hamilton. His brother, Richard, invited me around to his house for a drink. I said yes. For some reason when I got there I ran down the driveway. It was long and I was running so fast I fell over on the stones. I scraped my knee and my hands. I stood up, brushed myself off, laughed and then walked to the door. I knocked. Richard answered and let me in. I sat at the kitchen table in the glow of the kitchen light while Richard got me a drink. Then from the left, the door opened and in walked Henry. He smiled at me.

After that it was always Henry. There were others in between but I always returned to Henry.

Ours was a young, Hamilton love. So sweet and real. He wrote me poems and bought me presents. He told me he loved me at a party. Henry had an English accent, he was in a band and had tattoos. We drove around in his red Mitsubishi, smoking cigarettes. We went for day trips to beaches like Mount Maunganui and Raglan and Whitianga and Cooks Beach. We lay on the beach and swam in the waves. Our favourite

²⁰ Dowsett-Johnston 148

thing to do, still, even after eighteen years of being together is to go swimming in the waves.

The reasons you love someone are strange. I love Henry because he always drives me places. I never have to drive when I am with him. I love it how he tells me when it's raining. I love the sound of his voice, which you can't put down on paper but it's deep and at night when I can't sleep he reads to me until I can. I love how he is slim and muscular. But mainly, I love the smell of him. It's deeper than logic. It's primal. He smells just right to me.

Henry and I hadn't been away together for a while. Our daughter was eleven and she was going to stay at my parent's house for the weekend. We booked a sweet grey cottage in Greytown filled with plush couches and Martinborough style furnishings. Rich white woman furnishings I like to think of them as.

Henry drove me down State Highway Two and up over the Rimutakas. He held my hand but I let go on the winding parts of the road so that he could use two hands on the steering wheel. I didn't want to go over the edge. I looked down into the deep gorge as he drove. It's just the right amount of drive to the Wairarapa from our Kāpiti house. Not too far that the drive takes up all the day but far enough away that you feel you've gone on holiday. What the Wairarapa has though, most importantly, is vineyards, lots and lots of vineyards.

The temperature was perfect as we went from vineyard to vineyard, tasting and trying. I don't usually like chardonnay but we found a chardonnay so beautiful we had

to buy it for \$42 a bottle. We got two. You can afford to buy \$42 bottles of wine when you both work full time as teachers. And not only can you afford to buy them, you deserve to drink them for all your hard work. We also got a \$30 bottle of Pinot Noir and two bottles of Shiraz. With our tote we drove to Greytown to our accommodation. It was beautiful and quaint. Just like in the pictures. We sat down on the leather couch adorned with throws and poured ourselves a glass of the chardonnay.

We made love over and over. We spent the 48 hours mainly naked, only emerging into the world only when we needed more food. It was just him and me and wine.

The First Time

So yes, there were fun, social times but there were also very dark and scary times. It got to the point where my husband named my drunk alter-ego, maybe as a way for him to cope with a wife who had two personalities, his very own Jekyll and Hyde. Drunk me was so different to the real me that he called her Mariaba.

“Mariaba stole a bottle of wine from the house party we went to last night.”

“Mariaba told our good friend to go fuck himself.”

“Mariaba fell asleep on the bathroom floor.”

“Mariaba went out again after she got home.”

This Mariaba was out of control. Who was this beast? Was she the true me? Or was I the true me?

I drank because I felt boring if I didn't. I drank to escape. I drank to feel beautiful and empowered. I drank because I wanted to be glamorous and fun but Mariaba didn't turn out to be relaxed or beautiful or glamorous or for that matter, fun. Mariaba turned out to be toxic, unkind, messy and not the kind of person I wanted to be at all. Mariaba had to go.

The first time I quit drinking for any long period of time was after a night out I try to forget ever happened. It wasn't my fault at all. It was all my fault. We had some “great” friends and by “great” I mean people who lived around the corner within walking distance, were around our age, had a child the same age and liked to drink. But

we did have good times with them. I would go for long walks with the lady of the couple, Kim, during the day along the river or beach near our house. Our kids joined the same daycare and quickly became the best of friends, we went away together on weekend holidays.

Kim and John had a place they called “the farm” out in the hills of Reikorangi that we got to by four wheel drive. We packed our kids and our food and our booze and headed up there out of civilisation for a night or two. There was no TV, no internet, just trees. Kim and I would sit in the fire bath as the sun went down in our bikinis with our legs almost touching, facing each other and bitching about people we knew. The kids were in bed.

After a bunch of wines, brought to us by our husbands, I would pull myself out of the bath to go and get my towel. Kim would follow and wrap herself in a towel so she could talk to me about how great she was. Our friendship, if you can even call it that, mostly consisted of me listening to how great Kim was. She liked to tell me stories of all the fabulous things she had done and how much everyone loved her and how glamorous she was. She was starting to piss me off. Bit by bit, every time we saw them, every time she spoke to me.

It was her husband whose company I enjoyed. John was funny and easy going. He made me laugh and would dance with me late in the evenings while Kim and Henry sat watching. They weren't that into dancing. Dancing makes me happy. I like to feel my body move to music. I like to shut my mind down and let my body decide what to do.

On this particular night, we went for our usual barbeque and drinks at their other place that overlooked the sea. We were so blessed in our beachside community of Waikanae Beach at that time that young, working couples with helpful parents could afford to buy houses with views of the ocean. We drank nice, expensive(ish) wine and ate and laughed. Then the night, like so many other nights, got blurry. The kids were put to bed, the music came on, the dancing started. My husband left earlier than me with our daughter asleep on his shoulder which wasn't an odd situation but at some point I ended up alone dancing with John. It was a song I liked. It was all normal. We often danced in a haze. I took my wine glass off the table and took a slug. Some of it dribbled down my front. He laughed. It was a nice laugh and we looked at each other. Had I really looked at him before? Our hands reached out to hold each others as we continued to dance and he pulled me close to him. Then we were kissing, with tongue, and his hand was on my breast. Kim walked back into the room. I seemed to have blocked that part out. I remember the feeling in my stomach but I don't remember her face or what she said. I remember leaving, opening and closing the sliding door and walking home by myself in the dark. I don't remember getting home but evidently I confessed in a drunken slur to my husband. When I woke up in my own bed at home I knew something was very, very wrong. I opened my eyes but that hurt so I shut them again. My body was tense. There was a situation, I knew that, but it took me a moment to figure it out what the situation was. What had I said? What had I done? That's what life is like when you have a drinking problem. You wake up and you have to go through the process of figuring out the night before. There was the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach like a dark,

rolling ball. There was the fuzzy head that began to clear like clouds parting so that I could see memories of the night before. This was bad. I knew I was in deep trouble.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Henry told me. He was sitting with our daughter on his lap while she ate her breakfast. I understood but I couldn’t lose him. I loved him. I hadn’t meant to do what I did. It wasn’t all my fault. It was all my fault.

“Please,” I said. “I’ll quit drinking.”

Our friends never spoke to me or my husband again. My daughter, at three, wondered at the loss of her closest friend but she quickly forgot, as children do, that these people had ever been in our lives. I didn’t drink after that for a year and a half.

The Art of Forgetting

“Without forgetting it is quite impossible to live at all.”²¹

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Forgetting wasn't easy but eventually I forgot. The night when I lost my friends and almost my marriage seemed so far back in time that it was as if it didn't happen. I would be alright to drink again. My uncle died. I had no other strategies to deal with the loss. From fourteen the only way I had ever been able to deal with any emotional suffering was by drinking. I tried to grieve without alcohol but it was too hard. I needed wine. From then on, I needed wine when my dog died, I needed wine when I had a bad day, I needed wine to celebrate, I needed wine when my dad was diagnosed with leukaemia and his skin turned yellow. I needed wine after the long days at the hospital in isolation as I watched his hair fall out while I brushed it. I would get home at the end of a long day after he hadn't wanted me to leave his side even to go to the toilet. I watched him cry and panic that death was coming for him and his fear was so big and there was so little I could do. I would count the number of days he had been in isolation on the whiteboard so he could see how far he'd come. I would write the names of the nurses coming in for the day and I would write up his levels: his white blood cell count, his sodium, and other things that I didn't understand. I wrote encouraging messages with the white-

²¹ Nietzsche 10

board pens that were running out of ink. I took him to the toilet. I watched ‘The Chase’ TV show and ‘Tipping Point’ with him daily, repeatedly explaining the rules and concepts. ‘The Tipping Point’ is a show where you answer trivia questions and large coins fall from a chosen “drop zone” into levels that move and (hopefully) push the coins forward to tip over the edge into the mouth of the “win zone.”

“Are the edges of the coins magnetic?” Dad asked each day.

“I don’t know.” I replied.

“What’s this show called?”

“The Tipping Point.”

“Oh.”

We listened to the radio and while all this happened my father disintegrated before my eyes. There was less of him: less colour, less hair, less energy, less body weight, less strength, less Dad. Each time visiting hours were over my first stop was the supermarket for red wine, maybe one or two bottles. I would go home and sit quietly drinking my wine and think: “Will we get through this?”

Mum was there each day and often stayed the night at the hospital. Sometimes we would laugh at how delirious he was and the things he was saying. I know that my brothers were there helping and my husband was around but one evening I looked over at Mum and I thought, women are the strong ones. We are holding everything together here.

She liked it when I told her stories about the times I spent with Dad when she was having a break. We were tag teamers, relay mates, close but never quite there for each other.

“Today he said I was playing the tv show through his radio.”

“Really?” Mum laughed “He’s gone quite crazy.”

“He was telling me – I’ve seen this show. I’ve seen this show – and I was like, Dad, the TV isn’t on. It’s the radio. Then the doctors came in and they asked me how he was and I said well, he thinks the TV is playing through the radio so I’m not sure he’s all that compos mentis, and he looked over at them and said, “Firstly, I’ve seen this show that she’s put on the radio and secondly, don’t believe anything she says because she’s a liar.”

Mum laughed and then she couldn’t stop laughing so tears were running down her cheeks.

“He’s gone crazy,” she said.

But I knew he hadn’t. I am a liar.

The isolation room Dad was in had a bed – noisy as it inflated and deflated – a magical airbed sensitive to pressure because his back was sore. He really was a terrible patient – a giant baby who hated being left alone, who needed everything just so on his bedside table. He’d make you move things a centimetre to the left or right just so they were lined up.

“My glasses case goes there,” he said, “No, not there, over a bit. Over a bit more.”

Finally if he slept I could escape for a moment to the lounge where I'd do exactly the same thing I'd been doing next to his bed, drink a cup of tea or coffee, watch shitty TV and flick through a magazine, re-reading the same bits over and over again, never taking anything in.

There was a man I'd seen around the hallways as I'd entered and exited each day and we'd given each other polite nods. He was middle aged, with short back and sides, in jeans and a t-shirt. It was never the right temperature in the hospital. I never knew what to wear.

Finally we caught up by the fridge for a chat.

“Hi, I'm Ben,” he put out a hand

“I'm Mariana.”

We did the classic meet and greet.

“Who are you here with?”

“My wife.”

“What kind of cancer?”

“How's she doing?”

“How long have you been here?”

“Doesn't it suck here?”

“Yes it does.”

There were worse stories than his and mine. There was the mother who lugged three small children into the family room with tupperware containers filled with food and her husband would come out sometimes but he was so ill that he got cranky with the children.

There was the mother with the teenage son who never seemed to stop crying.

“What do you do?” Ben asked me.

“I’m a teacher. And you?”

“I’m a massage therapist.”

“Oh wow! Cool job! Does that keep you busy?”

“Well it used to.” Poor guy. He probably couldn’t work.

He kept talking to me and as with all the conversations I’d been having with anybody lately, I wasn’t able to concentrate and I’d tuned out. But as with all the other conversations I hummed along and tuned back in eventually to hear “And you know, if people actually knew anything about massage, they’d know that massaging women’s breasts is a fundamental part of the healing process as well as their genital regions.”

“Wait. What?”

“Losing my licence and the complaints. It’s been such a stress, what with my wife.” He said all this while looking at *my* breasts.

I was stunned. I stared at him.

“Um,” I stirred my tea with the popsicle stick very quickly “I need to go back to my Dad now.”

“Sure, yeah. See ya around.”

“See ya.”

Ha! What a fucking weirdo! How hilarious! I walked quickly back to the heavy doors, sprayed some hand sanitiser on my hands, let those doors close before wrangling my cup of tea to put more hand sanitiser on and pushed open the door to dad’s room. I couldn’t wait to tell Dad. He would find this so funny. He would laugh at the creep in the family room, bemused at being struck off the masseusers’ registry for his obsessions with women’s tits and genitals.

“Dad,” I said as I pushed back the curtain.

But Dad wasn’t there. There was an old, skinny, sick, bald, sleeping man with his mouth open on a noisy bed that I wanted to puncture so it would shut up.

I had no one to tell the story to.

After a while, there never seemed to be that many situations when I didn’t need wine and eventually, I needed wine everyday. Once you are going down the slide it is hard to stop. It just became easier not to decide whether I would have wine that day. I just would. Fullstop. Everyday. The decision was made for me. Over the time of my drinking career, I have held down a full time job as a teacher, raised a beautiful, intelligent, kind daughter, hung out with friends, spent time with my family, written a book, practised yoga and been a regular attender at the gym. One day I was driving in my car and a song came on the radio. Sometimes there are moments when everything becomes clear, just for a second. It was the song “Chandelier” by Sia who is an alcoholic.

*“But I'm holding on for dear life, won't look down, won't open my eyes
Keep my glass full until morning light, 'cause I'm just holding on for tonight.”*

And I thought, “This is my life. This sums up how I feel. I’m holding on for dear life.”

And I was. I was gripping so tight but I was about to lose my grip and fall.

Magpie Jewels

Before I fell the first time, I tried to control my drinking but the volume I consumed would always creep back up and before I knew it, I would be back to a bottle (or more if there was any in the house) a day. Often there wasn't anymore in the house and I would go to bed feeling agitated and upset. I discovered that sleeping tablets were a great way of stopping myself getting into trouble while I was drinking. If I took a sleeping tablet (with a clear warning on the label DO NOT DRINK ALCOHOL) then I would fall asleep before I could do any real harm.

“Do you remember nearly falling asleep at the table last night? Your eyes just started closing!”

“Did they? Haha. That's funny. I was so tired!”

It was embarrassing but not nearly as embarrassing as what I might have done had I not fallen asleep. The rules I made seem never ending now when I start to list them: No drinking during the week, three glasses of wine only, drink gin and tonic only, drink beer only, no more than one bottle of wine in one sitting, no drinking when around family members, no drinking everyday except Friday, no drinking alone, no drinking when I go out. The rules were contradictory but always they had one thing in common – I broke them.

It got to the point in my drinking where I wouldn't let my husband, Henry, have any of my bottle of wine.

“I got this for me,” I would exclaim. “If you want to drink get your own.”

He would quietly respond that he'd have a beer and if I was feeling nice I'd give him a small glass of MY wine. If he started to make a fuss, the next time I went to the supermarket, I would get one bottle for him and one bottle for me. But he didn't want to drink a whole bottle, he just wanted to have a glass or two with dinner. I suppose something you can really liken being an alcoholic to is hunger. You know when you're hungry and you can think of nothing else other than food? It's like that. You're so hungry that you can't think about other things like people's feelings. But hunger's not quite right. It's about wanting, needing, having to have. The way a magpie wants jewels. The magpie doesn't really need shiny things, but it feels like it does so it is always searching. Unlike a magpie though, I am not easily deterred or skittish when looking for my treasure. When I want alcohol, I am determined and hard to stop.

Message in a Bottle

‘Alcoholic’ seems like such a dirty word. Alcoholics are homeless people who lie in the gutter clutching brown paper bags and don’t ever brush their teeth. I don’t lie in gutters and I *always* brush my teeth. You can brush your teeth no matter how drunk you are. It’s like riding a bike. You never forget.

No one really knew how bad my drinking got except maybe my husband. It’s so easy to lie to friends and family members who don’t live with you. It’s so easy to even lie to yourself. Someone would invite me out for dinner and I would go around there with my bottle of wine. Someone would invite us out to the restaurant and I would drink too much. We’d invite people around to our house and I’d drink too much. But the people were often different so they didn’t notice the pattern. I’d begin drinking in one place so that when I arrived at the final destination I could drink more and then after I left I could drink more at home. Lying becomes second nature to an addict. I myself, only ever officially drank “three glasses” of wine. But what’s wrong with lying? It’s just sometimes easier than telling the truth. If I tell the truth I have to explain the truth and that takes time. It’s easier and quicker to lie. Lying is storytelling. Lies are just people saying what they wanted to have happened.

Alcoholics are everywhere, hiding in broad daylight. Who knows that I’m an alcoholic? My husband. My best friend, Lisette. The people at AA. My father (and he’s dead so he’s not telling anyone). That’s not very many people. I know heaps more

people than that. None of my other friends know, none of my colleagues know, my doctor doesn't know (and I'm fully stuck in the lie there!). But if I say it out loud, then it's true and I don't want it to be true.

I know alcohol is bad for me. I've read the stats. They're a bit of an eye opener. I mean economic impact and social and other inequalities are one thing – but cancer? Really? I've never seen a warning on any of the thousands of wine bottles I've consumed like the kinds of warnings that are plastered all over cigarettes – I have however seen some wonderful product design. The weird thing is that when I hear about the harmful effects of alcohol, it's just like white noise. The statistics don't seem to get into my heart space, the health warnings don't seem to reach the part of my brain that is addicted. This is where addiction gets messy. You can tell a person all you want that something is bad for them but that won't change their behaviour. I'm addicted to alcohol. When I see the red wine in my glass, I don't see economic inequality for women. I don't see cancer. I don't see violence or hospitals. I see a deep sigh of relief and the abandonment of my problems for a time. The linking of the good in the glass of wine and the bad results doesn't seem to work. I can't seem to connect the two. When I see a cool glass of (fake) champagne, I don't see addiction or hangovers or heated arguments. I see relief.

Last night in bed I checked my breasts obsessively for lumps. Surely the amount of alcohol I've consumed must be collecting in there by now. When my body has done its work of breaking down the alcohol it has made acetaldehyde. Acetaldehyde. It even sounds menacing but it doesn't look menacing in its molecular structure — it looks the

shape of a poodle, an unharmed, seemingly innocent poodle. Acetaldehyde can cause a change in our DNA which can trigger a response that leads to the development of cancerous cells.²²

Has the response been triggered in my body? If I was a cup, I must be at least half acetaldehyde. How long do I have before the effects of all this drinking catch up with me? How long do I have before the shadows become physical, real monsters? “Permanent change”, “Genetic mutations.” I scan the internet sites in a panic until I find something that gives me an out: “Being tall” is something that increases your chance of breast cancer. Phew. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I’m very short. Five foot one, no chance of breast cancer for someone that short, surely.

It’s no wonder I’m up at night checking my breasts at the moment. One of Lily’s school friends has just found out that her mother has less than a year to live because she has breast cancer. And that just makes the mind and heart go tick, tick, tick late into the night. Why does she have it and not me? Why do I get to keep living and not her?

²² See Drinkaware

Mother

“I was troubled, and still am, by the finality of the word ‘mother’, this great thundering archetype with the power to stop the intellect in its tracks.”²³

- Helen Garner

Motherhood. Hood, meaning “a covering for the head and neck with an opening for the face, typically forming part of a coat or cloak.” Is that what motherhood is? A covering for the head? Part of a larger thing – a coat or cloak. The cloak could be the family, the expectations. The coat could be uncomfortable. The hood is heavy and it blocks your peripheral vision.

My mother was beautiful, so beautiful it seemed that life always seemed to disappoint her. I can remember my mother covered in washing, walking fast back from the clothesline to the house, the dark green grass her background. Her hair was the colour of bark, a white sheet became a dress making her a mother goddess. Over my lifetime, I have watched her looks fade and the realisation set in that life was in fact difficult and never very fair. Her moods used to dictate our household and her bad ones could shift the foundations of our house like an earthquake. Was she happy (God I loved seeing her happy!) Had I pleased her?

²³ Garner 29

My mother entered the workforce at a time when a man was paid more than a woman even if she was better at her job. My father fell in love with her from across the office, or was it on the bus? He was so shy he never said anything.

“He just stared at me,” Mum said.

On the bus – staring; across the office at his desk – staring.

When I look at photos of her, I think how could he not have fallen in love with her? Thick brown hair, the clearest skin, the beauty of a painting, a figure to die for with slightly large breasts and that smile with front teeth just crooked enough to be endearing without looking bad.

He got her drunk on their first night out.

“Why don’t you like getting drunk, Mum?” I asked her.

“I don’t like not being in control.”

Funny, that’s why I love being drunk – so I can be out of control and not care.

Pregnancy

I didn't drink a drop of alcohol when I was pregnant. In fact, the reason I knew I was pregnant was because my boyfriend of two years, Henry, who would later become my husband, organised a picnic for Valentine's Day and I didn't want any wine. There was a plaid blanket, and a bottle of cheap red wine, two wine glasses lying down with their stems crossed over each other. There was a wheel of Brie in a silver package, crackers. Looking at it all made me feel sick.

“Would you like some wine?” he asked me as he unscrewed the lid.

“No, thanks. I'm good.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“Have some cheese and crackers.”

He'd gone to such an effort. I nibbled on a cracker. Maybe I was just having an off day, I convinced myself that night as I tried to get to sleep. I might be getting a cold. I *can't* be pregnant. I can't be pregnant. God, please don't let me be pregnant. That weekend, I was going to the Sevens – a rugby tournament at the Wellington cake tin stadium where beer flowed from every hole in the wall.

“Do you want a beer?” my dad asked.

“No thanks.”

“Do you want a beer?” my brother asked.

“No thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

The following week, I picked up a pregnancy test from the chemist in town and I didn't have the patience to wait until I got home to find out. The closest toilet was at Burger King. The shiny red seats greeted me and the bathroom smelt like cheap cleaning products. I walked deliberately to the toilet and sat down in the stall. I tore open the paper bag and got out the test. I peed on the stick and waited.

“Oh fuck,” I said out loud.

At twenty years old I was terrified. It took me ages to come out of the bathroom. No one was waiting for me so it didn't matter. I needed a cigarette. Wellington was cold that day (as it is so many days) and the sky hung like a grey cloak over everything. I sat on a bench and as I smoked my cigarette, I looked at the greedy pigeons wandering. What was I going to do?

I would have to tell Henry. Now was as good a time as any. I would walk around to his flat. Hopefully he would be home. Maybe I should have called first. That would have been the sensible thing to do. I arrived at the flat and let myself in. With five flatmates, people were always coming and going and there was no point knocking on the door because people might not be bothered to open it. It was always unlocked anyway. I wandered into the lounge and there he was – in the first place I looked – sitting on the couch with his arm around another girl. I stopped as if someone had punched me in the stomach. He jumped up.

“Um... hi... what are you... I mean, I didn't know you were coming.”

I looked at the girl sitting on the couch with the bobbed hair and a floaty skirt who looked absolutely nothing like me and instead of anger I felt like a balloon full of air that had been let go, withering up and away.

“I'll be outside,” I said.

I went and sat on the deck. I got my cigarette packet out of my handbag and put one in my mouth then fished around in my pocket for a lighter. There was very little wind and in the corner of the garden was the most beautiful white rose, just at its blooming stage of perfection, not over bloomed yet, plump. I stared at it.

Henry came outside and stood near the back door.

“Who is she?”

“No one, I mean, just someone from uni.”

“Has she left?”

“Yes.”

“I'm pregnant.”

I couldn't trust him, I realised. I was having a baby with someone I couldn't trust. I finished my cigarette and left.

Henry drove around to my parents' house that evening. He would be there he told me. We would do this together. I didn't say anything about that girl on the couch, yet I can still see her in my mind – the deep red of her skirt and the way her legs tilted sideways towards him. I was just so relieved he had come. I was so relieved at all the things he was saying. I wouldn't have to be alone. My baby would have a family. Henry

never said anything about an abortion. I didn't want an abortion. Most people expected I would have an abortion. Of course they did, it was 2003. Who wouldn't have an abortion? You'd be stupid not to. A young girl of twenty, a university drop-out working part-time in a retail store living with her parents while she tried to figure her life out. You'd be stupid to keep it. But somewhere inside me, I wanted her. I knew it was a her. I just knew and I loved her already.

Around three months later – it was a Saturday – I woke up in the morning and I had a funny feeling. There must be something wrong with the baby. There just must. There couldn't not be. How could I make a perfect baby? I couldn't do anything perfectly. I looked at the ceiling. I slept on the top bunk in the spare bedroom of my parents' house. It wasn't my bedroom. I'd never had my own bedroom in this large Churton Park house. It looked like a family home for sure, with its cedar weatherboards and the den style lounge but it wasn't where I grew up and technically I wasn't supposed to be there. I was just passing through.

That day I was going to go and see Henry. We'd spoken on the phone the night before. We needed to make some plans.

“Why don't you come and live with me at my parents and we can save some money?”

“I like my flat.”

“Yeah, I know but... we need to start sorting some things. Do you want to come round and we can make some plans.”

“I'm going into town tonight with everyone from the flat.”

“Could you not and come here instead?”

We argued. He pleaded his case. He needed this. He’d just finished teachers’ college. It had been a big year. He wanted to go out. He needed to go out and have fun and celebrate. This was the last night he would be able to do this sort of thing. He won the argument and I went to bed alone, but not quite alone. I had someone inside of me.

The next morning, I’d catch the number 54 bus that was always late. My jeans still fit but I could tell that this wasn’t going to be the case for much longer. Still, I did up the top button. How would I afford more clothes? I didn’t want to have to buy bigger clothes. I waited at the bus stop. It was late but it arrived. I looked out the window as the bus took the most round about way possible to the destination of Wellington City. Down backstreets, up hills with roads too small for a bus to even traverse.

I pinged at my stop and stood up holding the bar, then got out and walked the rest of the way to Henry’s flat.

I let myself in using the door that no one ever locked and walked up the stairs and across the landing to the right. Henry’s door was pulled shut and I paused before I opened it. I felt sick. It must be the morning sickness. That constant nausea that seemed to only be fixed by a packet of salt and vinegar chips.

He was still in bed asleep, on his stomach, his head to the side and his arm up around his pillow. I sat down on the bed and leant over to kiss him.

“Morning.”

He opened his eyes and smiled at me, reaching out to pull me in for a hug.

“Morning,” he said.

I sat like that for a moment, with my feet on the floor and my torso on an awkward angle but it was uncomfortable so I pulled myself free of his arm and sat up straight.

“Did you have a good night last night?”

“Yeah it was fun,” he replied, not moving from the position he was in.

I looked down at the floor. There were some women’s pants by my feet.

The girl on the couch. I picked them up.

“Whose are these?”

I waited for her name. I didn’t know her name. I didn’t want to know her name.

“Mel’s.”

What? Mel? Mel was Henry’s flatmate. Mel was my friend. I often sat on her bed across the landing in the hallway from Henry’s room talking and laughing. I had plaited her hair! It was thick and coarse and dirty blonde.

The anger that had lain dormant welled up inside me.

I lunged across the landing and whacked open her door.

“You are a fucking fat bitch,” I screamed at her. It was the meanest thing I could think of to say. She looked up at me, her white, chubby face scared and then she hid under the covers. I turned and went back into Henry’s room. My anger made me feel powerful, tall and strong.

Henry was crying.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” He pawed at me.

Why is he always sorry at just the right moments? Why couldn't he let me go then? Let me walk down those stairs and out the front door without him? But he didn't. He followed and said everything I needed him to say. He begged and pleaded and cried and looked me in the eye and promised everything. He would move out of the flat. He would move into my parents' place with me. We would be together. We would be a family. And it was that word 'family' that made me stop walking, that made me let him come home with me. I wanted my baby to have a family.

When I was thirteen, I sat on the messy floor of Lisette's bedroom. We were doing fortune telling. She had a special book that came with dice and we would ask questions.

Her hand looked so feminine as she gently shook the dice (black with white dots), her nails long, the inside of her hand the same colour as the inside of an apple.

There was a question about warnings.

"Okay, you go," she said.

"Oracle," I asked. "Do you have a warning for me?"

The dice landed on a five and a two. Seven.

She held the hard back book up to her chest and drew her finger down the page until she reached seven.

"Beware of the silver tongued rogue."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. Should we go get some food?"

"Yeah okay."

The book lay discarded on the floor for the rest of the weekend.

Despite being afraid, I loved my baby. Lily – meaning pure. I loved her more than anything. I knew her because I could feel her presence within me.

After work one day, I was walking home from the bus and I felt like shit. My thoughts were too much, I couldn't seem to breathe deeply. How would I do this? I looked down at the pavement as I walked and I saw a bird – a sparrow. My foot landed right next to it and it didn't move. I kept walking, then turned to look back because wasn't it funny that I had stood right next to the bird and it hadn't moved? It was still there, perched on the pavement and looking around. I walked back towards it slowly. I stood above it. Why wasn't it flying away? I bent down to pick it up and of course it flew up in the air. I almost laughed at myself. It was fine. The bird was fine. But as I turned to walk home again, it landed on my shoulder and it stayed there. No one would believe this. I couldn't believe it. I walked the rest of the way home with that bird on my shoulder.

Mum was getting out of her car as I walked up the driveway.

“Mum!” I whispered loudly “Look!”

Her eyes widened. “What's that bird doing on your shoulder?”

“I don't know!”

It was then that I realised that everything would be okay. I would be okay. My baby would be okay. The world would be okay. And at that moment, the bird flew down onto my hand, sat for a moment then flew away.

“That was weird!” Mum said.

I laughed. It was weird.

A Room of One's Own

“Many a woman stuck in domestic purgatory lives a bearable life thanks to the bottle.”²⁴

- Julie Bindel

I lost control of my body when I was pregnant. I was no longer the one in charge. I had no idea what I was doing but luckily my young body seemed to know exactly what to do. As my pregnancy wore on, my once slim frame started to do weird things. I would wake in the night with cramp so bad in my right leg that I thought I might die. My nose started to bleed too. I'd wake with deep red blood dripping onto my pillow and sit up to have it stream down my face and drip onto my t-shirt. I'd never had cramp or a blood nose before. When my stomach got so big and round that my belly button popped out, people seemed to think it was fun to rub my belly. But the inside of my belly button hadn't been touched since I was joined to my own mother so it wasn't used to being rubbed. It was sensitive and painful, yet I never said, “Please don't.”

Marriage and motherhood dawned on me slowly. In the beginning, I had notions that life would be fair but it became apparent that the responsibilities of parenthood, housework, family relationships and our family unit all came down to me. Virginia Woolf famously said a woman needs a room of one's own in order to write fiction. I

²⁴ Bindel www.theguardian.com

think of being able to write fiction as being independent, able to pursue one's dreams. But I picked up Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* the other day and there is an important point that is left out of that quote: "a woman must have money and a room of her own."²⁵ A woman must have money. I had no money. I had no income. I had no independence. The thing that made me angry and embarrassed was that I needed Henry. I needed him emotionally, physically and financially in a way that I had never needed anyone before. There were things that only he could provide and sometimes he wasn't so giving.

It was my mother-in-law who told me that women are the strong ones. She was right. I had to be strong. I had a choice. I could either fight it or suck it up. I sucked it up. I began to create a home for my family with rigour. I would create us a castle. I learnt how to do housework, cook and budget. I cared for Lily. I loved her more than I loved myself. I stopped crying because I felt lost and sad. I filled the hole inside me with fresh flowers from the Four Square and tomato soup that I made from scratch and bread from the bread maker. I walked and walked and walked and walked with my pram and became thin and fit. I read poetry to Lily and cleaned the toilet daily. I picked my clothes out carefully, aiming to look nice. I did my hair and painted my nails. I set my mouth into a thin line and I kept going. In the bathroom, Henry had put a mirror up on the wall above the sink with his toolbox. At 6 feet tall he had lined it up for his head. At five foot one, when I went into the bathroom, the small rectangular mirror was too high for me to see my face in. So every day, when I went into the bathroom to wash my face and brush

²⁵ Woolf 6

my teeth, I looked at the light blue wall – the space between the sink and the mirror. I remember standing by the bathroom door once and watching Henry play with his hair, styling it with gel and I thought, “Fuck him.”

For my entire life, I’d been told that I could do anything. My grades were better than anyone else in my class throughout high school, I was a high achiever, I was popular, I won trophies. Yet here I was, a housewife, no money or room of my own, no university degree, relying on a man-boy to get me through.

“I’ve got a job up the coast,” Henry had told me when I was pregnant. He would be a secondary school English teacher at one of the large high schools up there.

“Really? That’s great!” We would have an income.

“We’ll have to move up there.”

“Yeah, I guess we will.” It wasn’t a big deal. Only an hour out of Wellington so not too far from home. We set about looking for somewhere to live and found a little brown wooden two bedroom house in Raumati South. A South African woman with a strong accent showed us around and said, “No Dogs Allowed” several times. While I looked around at the sunny yellow walls, Henry used the toilet and when he came out the smell spread to the other rooms quickly and the whole house stank of shit. I hated that house. I still hate it now. It was down a driveway and the garden in the winter was always under water.

We didn’t have a dog so we took it.

Being an hour away from Wellington didn’t seem like a big deal but it meant I was an hour away from having friends who could pop in for a coffee. If they wanted to

come and see me, they would have to drive for ages or catch the train and if I wanted to see them, I would have to bundle Lily into the car and take a road trip. I was the loneliest I'd ever been.

Sometimes, I would lie awake at night plotting my escape as Henry slept soundly beside me. I needed an escape from my real life. I was unhappy.

I would try and make connections with other women down at the park as we pushed our small people in the swings, our faces freezing in the cold air while the rest of our bodies were wrapped up, our babies and toddlers so fat from being surrounded by clothing and hats and gloves. Staying inside was not an option. Staying in the house was like being in a prison of housework and fake heat.

“But do you like being at home?” I asked one woman down at the park who I'd got chatting to.

She looked at me like I was crazy, “Yes.”

Maybe I was crazy. I felt crazy. That day, after the park, I went to the liquor store and got a bottle of vodka and pineapple juice to mix it with. I stood in front of the shelves of glass bottles and was hypnotised by the colours. Which one should I get? Dark rum? Green midori? Clear gin?

“Can I help you?”

“No.” I grabbed the closest bottle to my arm – vodka – then went to the fridge for the mixer.

“Do you have ID?” the teller asked me as he scanned my items.

I pulled out my wallet and showed it to him. He was surprised I was old enough. With my baby on my hip, I took my plastic bag with the vodka and juice in it out to the car. I couldn't wait to drink it and as soon as I got home, I poured myself a big glass with ice. I sat down and drank it in the afternoon sunlight while Lily played on the floor and I felt okay. The way the light fell through the window was really quite beautiful and the trees started to look green again. Back came the colour into my eyes and I could breathe deeper. Things would be okay. I would get through this.

I can pinpoint this time, in our little house down the steep drive to a yard that turned into a bog when it rained, as the time I began drinking seriously.

Judgement Days

As a young mum, “How old are you?” was frequently asked of me in inappropriate situations. I was looked down upon as a young mother. And here’s the problem with that: people always seem to want evidence of this disapproval. But how do you prove a feeling or the hint of a feeling? I *felt* people’s judgement. I heard it in their actions and the tones of their voices. I saw it in the way their eyes passed over me as if I didn’t have anything valuable to say because I was a young mother and therefore the bottom of society’s pecking order. I couldn’t possibly know anything of value. It was as if I had done something wrong, made a big mistake by having a child young. I saw it in the way people looked at me when I was out at the shops with Lily. I saw it in the look on a Clown’s face at a fair when he gave Lily a balloon and asked her if she was having fun with her big sister and I said, “I’m her Mum.” It was a little different when Henry and I went out together with our daughter. People would smile and comment on how cute our little family was. But when left alone, with a baby face and no wedding ring, the full force of people’s judgement and hostility was evident.

My one and only trip to Mainly Music was a really crappy experience. None of the other mums talked to me.

“Hey, how are you?” I asked a mother near to me.

“Fine.” She looked me up and down and then walked away to talk to some other people.

I tried again when I sat down next to a Mum with her child between her legs.

“He really seems to like the music,” I smiled at her. She smiled back a half smile then got up and moved somewhere else.

I picked Lily up and tried to join in with a small group of mothers and their kids who had drums that they patted with their fat little hands. None of them spoke to me. I was in a room full of women and children and I felt alone. The woman running it had a long, blonde swinging ponytail, tight clothes on a tight body and a headset that amplified her voice to bounce off the walls. She sang about Jesus and clapped her hands. I sat on the floor with my legs spread and my daughter safely in the triangle of her mother, watching and clapping along. “Fuck Jesus,” I thought. It was too hot in the stuffy room so I slid off my jacket. There was a table of food with sandwiches and chocolate biscuits that you could eat after the sing-a-long. My appetite had disappeared and the Tim Tam tasted like sand in my mouth. I hunted around for that one nice person who is normally at any event but they hadn’t turned up that day. The women were all in their thirties with wedding rings on their fingers and I was different. It was as if there was a perimeter around my body that I couldn’t see, a bubble that the other mothers didn’t want to enter. I didn’t fit anywhere. I didn’t fit with the thirty-somethings but I didn’t fit with the teenage mums either. I poured myself a drink when I got home.

I had silly notions that prejudice didn’t happen. People had evolved. But the prejudice I experienced as a young mum was harsh and I’ll never forget it. Throughout my childhood and adolescence I had been popular with a large circle of friends. This was new to me – this isolation. I didn’t have social capital anymore. I wasn’t “cool”. My

old friends began to move from Wellington to other cities, to go on their O.E's. One by one they disappeared.

This time, although difficult for me, provided me with an inner strength I didn't know I had. I had to enjoy my own company. I became extremely close with my grandmother who I would go and visit regularly. My parents both worked full time but Grandma was home during the day and she adored Lily. I would drive for an hour to the safety of her home. She provided me with a sanctuary.

"Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Yes please."

The tea cup clattered on the plate as she brought it over to me, spilling over the edge. She had a tremor.

Even her voice shook.

"How are you?" She asked me. Like, really asked me.

"I'm lonely."

"You will be okay."

Would I?

"You are a wonderful mother. You're doing a wonderful job."

Was I?

"Lily is lucky to have a mother like you."

Was she?

"I'm so tired."

"You go and have a lie down while I read to Lily."

I went into her spare room and fell asleep immediately.

I do not feel sad about this time. It taught me a lot. It taught me the value of kindness and not judging. It taught me that I was capable. It taught me the value of true friendship because in the end, it was other women who got me through. I made a friend around the corner with blonde curly hair that bounced when she walked. A traveller who had come back to New Zealand to buy a house and have her baby. Another mum with a daughter with white blonde hair who had also moved up from Wellington and didn't know anybody. A young hippie mum who was terrible with money but always made me laugh. Without those women, the long days at home would have been unbearable.

And, during this time, I hated Henry. He was immature and unreliable. He was a good dad but a shitty partner. I had to swallow my pride a thousand times to keep my family together. But I did keep our family together. I managed it – somehow – and now as I sit here and write, my husband, who has learnt how to be a man, is making me a coffee.

Book Club, also known as Wine Club.

Would I be thought of differently if I had drunk alcohol while I was pregnant? What if I'd gone out and got really, really drunk before I knew I was pregnant? Lots of people do that. I feel lucky that I didn't drink when I was pregnant. I feel relieved. To me, drinking appears so intertwined with motherhood anyway – after the baby is born and sufficiently breastfed for the right amount of time, of course. There are always posts up on Facebook saying stuff like: “If you combine wine and dinner the new word is winner” and “Technically you're not drinking alone if your kids are at home” and “The most expensive part of having kids is all the wine you have to drink.” Nowhere can this wine-mummy phenomenon be seen better than in ‘bookclub.’

When my daughter was around one, another mum I knew invited me to a book club – a mummy's book club, at the house of a woman I hadn't met yet. I was excited. As an avid reader, I missed discussing what I'd read with other people and I could do with a night out.

“What should I bring?” I asked.

“Wine and a plate.”

I bought a bottle of bubbly and made some brownies to take. I put the latest book I had read in my handbag. *The Poisonwood Bible*. My friend picked me up at around 7pm. It was dark and the evening was chilly due to the lack of clouds in the sky but that meant it would be a beautiful day tomorrow. We made our way through suburbia where all the roads are paved nicer than anywhere else and all the houses look similar. This

house was a little different though, down a long driveway and grand looking as you pulled up.

“Oh wow!” I said as we stopped the car.

The house was beautiful on the inside too, the surfaces shone. How did she get them so shiny? Even her hair was shiny. Her kids came out from the bedrooms to say goodnight politely and they looked shiny. Their pyjamas seemed brand new. A boy and a girl, the boy older. They ran back to bed and we never saw them again for the rest of the night. That lady never had to read her kids the book *Go the Fuck to Sleep*.

The bench was full of snacks: cut up carrot with hummus, a cheese ball surrounded by crackers. Wine glasses stood erect on their tall stems, just waiting for the bubbles to be poured.

“Would you like a glass?” Our hostess with the mostest asked.

It became apparent quickly that we would not be talking too much about books. We would be eating and drinking but most importantly *escaping*.

The night turned feral. The hostess drunkenly slurred about how she never saw her husband because he commuted to and from town and worked late often and that they would most probably have to move to Auckland soon because of his job and that would take her away from the support systems of her mother and sister. She didn't want to go. Another woman confided that her husband had a gambling problem and she was struggling to pay the bills because of it.

“I hate my partner,” I chimed in. This was actually quite fun.

The music came on. We danced and ate and drank and danced and forgot about fucking everything.

“I love book club!” I yelled.

“Me too!” Yelled someone else.

My sober driver had organised to leave her car there for the night and we would now be getting a taxi home. When I stumbled into bed at 2 o'clock in the morning, Henry said, “Did you have fun?”

“Yes,” I replied.

I did have fun. It was the most fun I'd had in ages and because I was only twenty-two, I woke up with no hangover. I had left my book on the kitchen bench. I never got it back.

I soon discovered the beauty of being a stay at home mum was that I could start drinking wine with my friends who lived within walking distance in the early afternoon on a Friday while our kids played happily together. We would sit and eat and chat and so what if I walked home a little tipsy at 5pm to greet Henry?

The Beauty of Things

“So she lives. We hope happily.

And we hope ever after.”²⁶

- Fiona Farrell

I think somehow I’m skipping over the beauty of motherhood, the playing on the beach with my daughter who fell asleep sandy and salty wrapped in a towel in my arms, the absolute joy of hearing a new word. The eating of watermelons on the deck, watching the pink juice run down her chin and chubby arms, the same arms that would grow long and thin like the rest of her body. The morning cuddles when she would play with my hair and giggle. To wake me up in the morning she would pad into my room, climb up onto the bed and slowly pull my eyelids apart. My first vision every morning was of her big eyes, long black eyelashes and mischievous smile: Good morning, mummy.

Lily spoke very early and could hold a decent conversation by two years old. She became my best friend and we were a firm team. Me and her. Her and me. We went shopping. She was and still is a great shopper. Everything I tried on she would say, “Oh Mummy, you look so beautiful.” She always made me feel good.

I started to take control. She gave me power. I would become a strong, independent woman, a role model for her to look up to. One night as I sat on the steps of

²⁶ Farrell 89

my deck, smoking a cigarette and looking up at the stars, it hit me. I would train to become a teacher. I had wanted to be a teacher throughout my childhood, both my grandmothers were teachers and an aunty and uncle too. It felt right. It was in my blood. The next morning, I got up, got dressed and while I had Lily on my lap I researched and enrolled for Teachers College. I would study extramurally and in three years time I would be a fully trained primary school teacher. I had a goal.

After I enrolled, I had a shower and had an audience as usual while I dried myself.

“Mummy, what’s that?” Lily asked me as she pointed at my pubic region.

“That’s pubic hair.”

“Will I get any of that?”

“Yes you will, when you’re much older.”

“I can’t wait! I’m going to grow mine down to the ground!”

Quicksand

“I was aware of an undercurrent of fear deep in my gut, a barely definable sensation that the ground beneath my feet wasn’t solid or real.”²⁷

- Caroline Knapp.

In my time as a drinker, red wine has risen up through the floorboards and started to drown me. As the wine reached my ankles, I thought “Everyone else is drinking; Why don’t they get hangovers as bad as mine?” As it reached my knees, I thought: “Why is everyone so angry with me? They were all drunk too.” And as the wine reached my waist, I started to panic: “How can I stop?” “Will I ever be able to stop?”

As a child, I had a fear of quicksand. I would go over and over in my mind what I needed to do if I ever had the unfortunate trouble of accidentally falling into some. You musn’t struggle, just relax, lie down and float on your back. Even though you feel like panicking and flailing about – don’t do it, you will only sink further in. Take deep breaths and use your arms to propel yourself slowly to safety.

I can’t say, even when I’m sober, that I will never drink again. I would love to be able to say that but if I’m not vigilant, the waipiro could sneak up behind me when I’m not looking and I could once again be a slave to it. I don’t like feeling my own feelings. I don’t like not being able to go out for wine with my friends. I don’t like not being able to forget about life for a while but I do like feeling more in control. I do like waking up

²⁷ Knapp 17

without a hangover and in writing this I do like being honest. This was not the memoir I wanted to write. I did not want to say: I am a woman and an alcoholic. But I have said it. I have told my nightmare truth. I have had an intimate relationship with alcohol. I have loved alcohol and I have been hurt by alcohol. I'm just lying here floating on my back and trying not to panic.

My Love

“Love of our kind requires so much amnesia. Despite his eternal apologies. Despite how far we’ve come, how we’ve both changed, grown, our bond strengthened, one of now mutual respect, constant communication. For I love him yes...”²⁸

- Kate Zambreno

There are so many different ways to look at one thing. When you look at a thing, you can look at it from the side or above or behind. Like my relationship with Henry. Loving a person is like looking at an agapanthus flower. Sometimes it looks good, sometimes it looks strange. They are ugly and beautiful at the same time, ghastly from far away and tear jerkingly beautiful up close. There is an agapanthus blooming in my garden. I didn’t plant it there. It just appeared. The wind brought it to me and I cannot bring myself to pull it out. Even though it doesn’t go with the rest of my garden, even though it shouldn’t be there, even though it is a weed, it is there. Sometimes I feel this way about Henry. He is so many things to me – horrible and wonderful all at the same time. I have seen him from many different angles. I have looked at him. I have loved him and I have hated him. But he is planted in my garden. He *has* planted in my garden and grown me a daughter. I cannot bear to pull him out. After all, he must have seen me from so many

²⁸ Zambreno 42

different angles too. He has looked and he has not looked away and he has not pulled me out of his garden.

“What do you think about my drinking?” I asked Henry the other night as we watched Netflix in bed. I lay on his chest with his arms around me. I couldn’t see his face. I watched the screen as he paused and took a moment to answer.

“I hate the inevitability of it. I hate how when I see you open a bottle of wine, I know you won’t stop until it’s all gone.” We went back to watching the screen and then he said something weird.

“But I know it’s because of your twin.”

“What?” I laughed.

“It’s because you were a twin and it died before you were born and now there is always something missing from your life. So you’re always looking for something you can’t find.”

I cracked up, “You’re crazy.”

My invisible twin. My mum was violently ill when she was pregnant with me. There were two of us to begin with. But only I live. I can’t find him. And he’s not at the bottom of a wine bottle. I’ve looked.

Gasoline

“I understood drinking to be the gasoline of all adventure”²⁹

- Sarah Hepola

Every year for the last four years my best friend Lisette and I have gone up to Auckland Fashion Week as ‘media’. We managed this by starting up a blog and writing about whatever the fuck we pleased. It turns out if you have enough readers, you can go up to Fashion Week, write about fashion and get loads of free shit. It’s a sweet break from our lives as mothers and wives.

Last year, The Stolen Girlfriends Club show was at a warehouse somewhere in Auckland where uber drivers don’t usually go. We shared our uber with Desiree, our Mormon, clothing designer friend and Vlad, our new tall and loping Russian friend with a ponytail. Everywhere Vlad went you wanted to follow him because he looked like he was going somewhere.

Lisette had given me a pep talk before we left our hotel room while she was doing my hair and makeup. We knew we’d be seeing Desiree at fashion week. We saw her there every year and had accidentally made friends with her.

“We musn’t talk about sex in front of the Mormon.”

“Okay,” I agreed, nodding.

²⁹ Hepola 6

“She’s moving to my area and her kids are going to go to my son’s school.”

“Okay,”

“We musn’t talk about anything that Mormons don’t like. We are good clean people. No talking about anal sex.”

“Hey!” I protested, “It’s you that talks about anal.”

“True. But I definitely won’t be talking about anal tonight. We are sophisticated women. We impress Mormons.”

“Well I’m not drinking tonight so I will probably only have intelligent conversation and anyway, before you open your mouth just think, what would Kate Middleton do?” I advised her. This is one of our sayings when we are trying to be perfect women: What would Kate Middleton do?

“Okay, good idea. Oh my God, your fucking hair does not do what I say.”

“Let’s just go.” Trying to make my hair do what I wanted was something I’d given up long ago.

I actually knew that there was in fact nothing you could do to impress Mormons because I grew up in Hamilton where I had Mormon friends. Their basements were full of food for the end of the world when only they would survive.

When I was twelve I went to my friend’s house.

“What’s all this food for,” I asked Heather my new long, lanky (later to become willowy) friend.

“Oh, my parents collect it all for the end of the world.”

“Oh, okay cool. I’ll come here if the end of the world happens.”

She looked at me uncomfortably.

“What?” I asked her.

“You won’t be here.”

“Why not?”

“Well, you’re not a Mormon.”

“So?”

“Well, only Mormons will survive the end of the world.”

“How come only the Mormons survive?”

“Not sure,” she shrugged, “Want some biscuits?”

“Yep.”

We took a packet and ate the lot of them. I don’t feel guilty because they would probably be off by now and, anyway, the world hasn’t ended yet. Heather has moved away from her family home and lives with her husband and children. I don’t know if she’s still a Mormon.

The real issue with Mormons though is that they don’t drink. Desiree the clothing designer had never had a drink in her life. Not one. Ever.

“She’s such a *good* person,” Lisette said.

“I wonder what that’s like,” I pondered.

“She doesn’t even drink coffee.”

“What the fuck?”

“I know!”

“If you’re not addicted to coffee, I can’t be your friend.”

“She’s so nice,” Lisette sighed.

There were shows earlier in the day at the Viaduct Event Centre on the Auckland waterfront. Stolen Girlfriends Club always show late at night because that’s what cool people do and they always show at an off-site location (also what cool people do). But we had other shows to attend first so we walked down from our hotel in our high heels along Queen Street towards the water then turned left and tottered along.

We’d stopped at a shop along the way and I bought some sunglasses. It was much sunnier in Auckland than I expected. We had come from Wellington where the last month had been dreary.

I popped on my sunglasses and turned to Lisette, “Should I wear these with the tag still on so people know I just bought them?”

“Definitely.”

“Fuck, these shoes are uncomfortable.”

“So are mine.”

“Can we sit down for a minute?”

We sat down on a park bench to rest our poor feet. Feet are the true victims of fashion week. My resolve not to drink was weakening. It was such a nice day. I could totally go a glass of bubbles.

“Have you got your ticket to Stolen Girlfriends Club?” I asked Lisette. We wouldn’t be returning to our hotel before the show and sometimes she forgot things so I had to look after her.

She rifled through her bag and pulled out a bent and mangled looking ticket.

“Why can’t you look after your things?”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. A ticket’s a ticket.”

I pulled out my straight and unbent ticket.

“Okay, let’s go or we’re going to be late.”

Between the next show and the show after that I accidentally got drunk on bubbles. Lisette found me at the bar with some new friends.

“You can have my Stolen Girlfriends Club ticket,” I handed over my ticket to the outstretched hand.

“What are you doing?” Lisette asked.

“Lisette!” I hugged her, “This is my new friend Yuri. Yuri this is Lisette.”

“Why are you giving Yuri your ticket?” She demanded.

“Yuri has fallen in love, haven’t you, Yuri? And the girl he has fallen in love with is going to the show. He needs to go.”

Vlad appeared. Lisette told on me. “Mariana is giving her ticket away to Yuri.”

“This is not a good idea.”

“Yuri is Polish,” I told Vlad.

They shook hands.

Desiree turned up and brightly said, “Should we go?”

“Yes we should! Have fun, Yuri!”

He grabbed my hands, “Thank you so, so much!”

We walked away towards the exit.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I believe in love!”

We piled into the uber.

“It’s fine.,” Lisette consoled herself out loud, “We’ll get in. I’ve got a ticket, Vlad’s got a ticket. Desiree’s got a ticket. It’s just Mariana who needs a ticket.”

“I have no ticket.” Vlad said.

“Wait, what?” Lisette replied

“Yeah, um, guys,” Desiree said “I’ve, um, got no ticket either.”

“So we’ve only got this one ticket?” Lisette held her mangled ticket up.

“I’ve got a lanyard!” I exclaimed then I started to laugh and laugh and laugh then Vlad laughed and laughed and Lisette laughed and laughed and Desiree laughed (but not too loud) and we laughed all the way to the abandoned Stolen Girlfriends Club warehouse where we were all let swiftly in because no-one gave a fuck about tickets. Actually, Vlad knew a man who knew a man.

The place was just the kind of place a fashion show should be held. Concrete and gloomy and sexy. People stood around holding drinks and being good looking. People are just better looking at fashion week. Sometimes on the way home in the aeroplane back to my normal life of teaching and being a mother, I get a fright at how ugly ordinary folk are. Or maybe not ugly, just ungroomed.

“This is a fire hazard,” Vlad said “Where are the exits?”

He was right. In a fire we would all be dead.

“Where are the exits?” He asked someone else who shrugged at him.

“This is not good.” He said as he loped away. “I am going to speak to someone about this.”

“Should we follow him?” I asked Lisette

“Nah let’s get a drink.”

“Yeah and then find a seat. Where is the bar?” There were around three levels of seating up concrete sets of stairs. We caught glimpses of the models as they changed in tight places.

On the second level up, we decided to split our tasks into two. I would find seats with Desiree. We had lost Vlad in the abyss, and Lisette would go to the bar.

Lisette was at the bar, gesticulating wildly. Maybe she needed help getting the drinks.

“I’ll just go help Lisette,” I told Desiree, “Save our seats?”

“Of course.” She really was so nice.

I made it to the bar so I could hear Lisette.

“Are you the manager?” she was yelling above the music

The guy behind the bar nodded.

“Good. I need to speak with you. Why are all the bar staff you hire so good looking?”

“Pardon?”

“I said, why are all your bar staff so good looking? It’s unnatural.”

“What can I get you?”

“Oh, I’ve ordered. That guy’s getting them for me. That exceptionally good looking young man over there.”

“Ha!”

“Do you just sit at home and wank over their CVs?”

He cracked up and handed over the drinks she’d ordered. They were free. Do you hear me? Free. Like at a wedding. Free, free, free, free, free.

“Thanks,”

Lisette had ordered us two each.

“I can’t be bothered to go back and wait at the bar. We’ll pretend they are for Desiree.”

“Okay.”

Since the show was late starting, we got to go to the bar a total of three more times before the fifteen year old models stomped and pouted through the warehouse, up and around the concrete stairs and back again. The show lasted a total of around fifteen minutes.

“I’m going home to bed.” Desiree said, “There’s lots of shows tomorrow so I need to be up bright and early.”

“Should we go home instead of going to the after party?” Lisette asked me.

The after party was vodka and redbull, vodka and redbull, vodka and redbull. Models walked around looking like models. Young girls danced and snorted cocaine on the round, glass tables.

“Why can’t we ever do cocaine?” I asked Lisette.

“We have Red Bull,” she held up her glass.

We danced and the lights went off, on, off, on, red, blue, red, blue, red, blue.

I don't remember getting home.

“Why does Stolen Girlfriends Club try to kill us?” Lisette moaned when we woke in our hotel room. It was past the time of the first show we were supposed to be at. It was also past the time of the second show we were supposed to be at.

“I might die,” she said.

I checked my phone and there was a text from Desiree: Where are you guys?
Smiley face emoji, smiley face emoji.

“That was nowhere as bad as last year.”

“Oh yeah, last year.”

What a Man!

Last year, I was invited to a hen's night. The invitation on Facebook said: "Let's get Anna wasted." We would meet for brunch in Petone first then go to Paintball then drive to Martinborough, get dressed up as our male alter egos and get fucked up. The invite was specific about what would be expected: "It will be BYO but there will be a fine if you only bring a 4 pack of sugar free vodka cruisers (we are not pissing around here ladies)." I saw the invitation and panicked a little bit. This would be a high pressure situation. I would be expected to drink. However, I had planned not to drink. I told my husband I would politely refuse any alcohol.

"Just say you're pregnant," he joked.

"I suppose I could pretend..."

I actually had fun putting together my male alter ego before the hen's night. His name was Martin. He was young and wore a flannelette shirt, baggy black jeans, skater shoes and a hat. He was a virgin and hoping to get his learners license soon. Martin was sure to have a good time at the hen's night.

Brunch was at a quaint eatery down Jackson Street in Petone. The walls were maroon and the tables a light wooden brown. My eyes had to adjust to the light when we came in off the bright street. The chairs were plump and comfortable. We all greeted each other. Anna, the bride to be, was dressed in her active wear for Paintball. The ladies were from three distinct parts of Anna's life – her teacher friends (that's how I fit in), her high school friends and the partners of her husband to be's closest friends. The leader of

the pack, chief organiser Sarah, had the day and night planned like a soldier. She stood at the head of the table and let us know what was what. She outlined the plan for the day then said:

“Put your hand up if you’re pregnant.”

One lady’s hand went up down the other end of the long table.

“Okay - one, two, three...” Sarah began counting the rest of the heads.

“Fourteen bubbles please.”

Oh shit. I didn’t expect to be asked outright to put up my hand if I was pregnant. What was Plan B? I tried to think of an excuse not to drink but before I knew it the long stemmed glass was in front of me, I was saying cheers and throwing my head back for a big gulp. If you can’t beat em, join em.

After brunch, we drove up a winding road in the Hutt Valley to Paintball. It was starting to rain and the hills had turned a darker green as they do when the clouds go grey. We walked down the path and into the hut which smelt like rain. We would get to wear camo gear and fire fake bullets at other fake soliders. I was kind of excited. We were put into two teams and I felt proud to put on my shade of army jacket. I imagined what it would have really been like to be in a war. The closeness you must feel to someone who has got your back, who is on your team. We automatically bonded with our teammates. We needed each other now.

Our team was sent to the right of the hill to assemble at our base. The aim was to get the flag from the other team and bring it home. We had a mask on but no helmet. My breath heated up my mask and clouded my vision as we went bush. Attack is the best

form of defence, I thought. I wanted to shoot someone. My right hand man, Emma, was at my side. We had paired off to go down to the stream and attack from behind. We used ropes to climb slippery hills and stones and bushes to hide behind.

When we were almost at their base I went fully commando, running and hiding behind bushes, rolling on the ground and shooting wildly. I could hear the bullets whooshing past my head as I ducked and manoeuvred around to shoot my targets. I was shot in the upper arm.

“I’ve been hit! I’ve been hit.”

It felt like someone had pinched me really hard.

To end the paintball experience, Anna would run the gauntlet as men do on their stag dos. We all lined up to take aim as she ran past us. I couldn’t shoot her. I pretended to, but I didn’t.

When we got to the accommodation in Martinborough with rich, white woman furnishings, I fully became Martin and got to meet the other guys without their army masks on. Bob had dreads, a red and black, flannelette shirt. He was the most handsome of all of us. Geoff was a semi-retired businessman, looking suave in a blue suit. Ross was a truck driver with shoulder length curly black hair. I’m not quite sure who Anna was. She had on a moustache, an apron with a cock and balls on it and some sort of hunting hat.

Let the games begin. The hen’s night games (courtesy of Pinterest) were played as our male alter egos. We played the humping balloon game where you stick a balloon between your pelvis and another party goer’s ass and pound it till you pop it. I pounded

the balloon as if I were fucking a woman. I held her hips and pushed hard on the balloon between us repeatedly. I felt powerful and when the balloon popped my pelvis slammed into her ass.

We played 'Eat the Pinky dick' which was when one person stood with a Pinky Bar in between their upper thighs and the other had to unwrap it and eat it, on their knees, with only their mouths.

Bob said, "It felt good standing watching the top of her head below me move back and forth"

As the night wore on, the drinking got more serious. We had graduated from glasses of bubbles to tequila.

"It's SHOT ROULETTE time!!" Ross the trucker yelled as his curls bounced. There were fourteen shot glasses, four had tequila, four had wine and the rest had water. I got tequila. Typical.

At times we forgot our male alter-egos and returned to ourselves.

One lady confided in me, "I'm kind of allergic to spirits. The last time I drank them I did something really bad."

"What was it?"

"It was the worst thing I've ever done."

"What?"

"I can't tell you."

"Just tell me."

"I can't."

“Just tell me. I won’t tell anybody.”

“Okay. I was at my sister and brother-in-law’s engagement party.”

“Yeah...”

“I was really drunk, like really, really drunk.”

“Yeah.”

“I shat in their office in the middle of the floor.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, my sister’s husband still won’t speak to me.”

“Why did you own up? You should have kept that shit a secret.”

“Well, I didn’t. They found out because there was shit on the duvet in the bed I was sleeping in.”

“Well... it’s not like you murdered anybody.”

“True. Yeah. That’s right. I didn’t murder anybody.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Bob sauntered over.

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done when you’re drunk?”

“That’s easy. I let my boyfriend’s best friend fuck me up the bum hole.”

“Ha! What about you Anna?”

“When I was at uni, I fell on my face walking home from the pub and smacked my face on the concrete, chipping my two front teeth and cutting my chin. I walked home pissing blood. But it was fine because one of my flatmates was a med student and she wasn’t that drunk so she stitched me up. You can still kind of see the scar.” She thrust her chin towards me. I could kind of see it.

“What about you Emma?”

“I don’t remember the worst thing that ever happened to me when I was drunk.”

“But do you know what it is?”

“Yeah because other people told me.”

“What happened.”

“I passed out on the footpath when I was walking by myself on my way home to the hostels. A guy found me and started dragging me into the bushes. But another guy saw and dragged me out and took me home. He came around the next day and told me.

“What did he say?”

“He said I should never drink that much again.”

I (or Martin if you prefer) ended the night at the pub slow dancing with a tall, still striking, sixty year old woman, my face resting on her breasts which were really comfortable. Bob ended the night in the spa pool with his cellphone still in his pocket. Emma ended the night really drunk. Probably drunker than the night she was dragged into the bushes.

In the morning when we woke up we were hungover and we were women again. I realised I didn’t know what most of the women’s real names were — only the names of their male alter egos and I realised that the night before had been the most fun I’d had in ages. It was so freeing to be a man. No one hit on me; my clothes were comfortable; I didn’t give a second thought to my outfit all night. There was no need to readjust, to check in the mirror if I looked alright. Lipstick and make-up hadn’t been an issue. I

hadn't needed to reapply lipstick because I didn't have any on in the first place. The people at the pub had just kind of laughed at us — would they have laughed if we had been a bunch of really drunk women dressed as women behaving badly? I had danced for hours because my feet didn't hurt in my Chuck Taylors like they did in my normal going out into town shoes. I had been free.

Ugly Drunk Girl

“We view femininity as a profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit.”³⁰

I’ve come to realise that people don’t like drunk women. They like sexy, sober women holding a wine glass seductively but they don’t like crying, stumbling, messy, tragic drunk women – of any age. I remember reading some guy’s advice to his teenage daughter on the internet and number three was: “Never be the drunkest girl at the party.” I thought – Fuck him. How dare he say that to her? She can be the drunkest girl at the party if she wants. Is she allowed to be the second drunkest girl at the party? Or the third? This was a man’s advice to his daughter – a list of everything he’d learnt so he could impart his wisdom onto her about how to live and *that* was on the list. That was what he thought was so important that he had to write it down: “Don’t be the drunkest girl at the party.” What party is he even talking about? A high school party? A dinner party? A wedding? The party of life? And what if she, like me, develops a drinking problem? She’ll have to hide it from her father. Which is interesting because my father was one of the only people I didn’t have to hide my drinking problem from. He knew and he loved me anyway.

³⁰ Griffin et al 184

How appropriate is it to mention you have a drinking problem? The fact that I've done so much hiding makes me wonder how many other women are hiding? We all have secrets. So how many women are out there in New Zealand with a very real drinking problem who are too scared to get help for fear of being judged? I am ashamed — I do feel weak and like a bad person. I'm mad at myself for getting addicted to something that is addictive. I don't blame alcohol. I blame myself. I feel I should be stronger. Guilt is a messy, shitty emotion and is part of having a drinking problem. Self control seems to be something I'm lacking but you can't buy self control from a store or online. Guilt seems to be free though. I can pick that up anywhere, at the end of my bed, in the look in my husband's eye, at the bottom of the driveway on the way to work with a hangover.

I can remember learning to read. The evolution of black lines and shapes on a page becoming sounds and words in my mouth. Sometimes I am afraid to die because I won't be able to read more books after I am dead. So it was to reading I turned in the beginning, trying to discover what was wrong with me. It was to reading I turned to learn about women and alcohol. It helped me understand. I found in books the most incredible women. Intelligent, strong women; some mothers, some successful in their careers but all writers and all alcoholics. Ann Dowsett-Johnston was the first one I found in a friend's bookshelf. It was Ann Dowsett-Johnston who made me question society and the role it has to play on women and addiction: "In our society, would you rather be known as an alcoholic or a person who suffers from depression? I have posed this

question to dozens of women in the past three years. The answer? Not one woman chose alcoholic. To a person, they felt the stigma was too overwhelming.”³¹ Being an alcoholic woman is not someone to be admired in our New Zealand society. I’m not a role model. I can never be a role model as long as I’m a drunk, no matter what other stuff I do. I’ll still be a drunk woman.

When I first saw Ann Dowsett-Johnston’s *Drink: The Intimate Relationship between Women and Alcohol* (2013), I was drawn to the white cover that has the impression of a red stain from the bottom of a wine glass left sitting for too long. I didn’t know there was such a book. The word ‘intimate’ struck a nerve. I picked it up from the shelf and went to that place where only you and the book exist. I wanted the world to go away so I could sit down and read it at once. The woman who owned the shelf was talking to me but I heard nothing.

“Mariana?”

“Huh?” I replied.

“You can borrow that if you want?” she said.

“No thanks.” I stuffed it back on the shelf. Why would *I* need to borrow *that* book?

I ordered it online when I got home. It was the first time I felt understood in relation to my drinking and the first time I felt that someone else knew what it was like to be in my head: “I was full of new resolve. I had made a New Year’s resolution never to drink alone. I had made that promise to my sweetheart, and I intended to keep my

³¹ Dowsett-Johnston 263

word.”³² Ann Dowsett-Johnston wrote words that I understood on a deep level: “With that first sip, my shoulders seemed to unhitch from my earlobes. With the second I could exhale. I loved the way wine worked on my innards. That first glass would melt some glacial layer of tension, a barrier between me and the world. Somehow with the second glass, the tectonic plates of my psyche would shift, and I’d be more at ease.”³³

³² Dowsett-Johnston 8

³³ Dowsett-Johnston 12

Double Standards

I struggle to handle the double standards I'm always faced with in relation to my alcohol consumption. It is acceptable for me to drink in public. It is not however acceptable for me to be drunk in public. I know as a woman I should be seen as attractive and yet when I drink too much, I am seen as unattractive. This middle space, this holy grail of the right amount of drunkenness always seems to elude me. I simply cannot find it. Things used to come out of my mouth when I had been drinking — hidden truths, worries, concerns. But then I learnt to be quiet. If a woman gets drunk at home by herself and no one sees her, was she ever drunk at all?

There are a few men (or boys) in my life that have not seemed too bothered about my attractiveness when I was drunk. It seems that getting tipsy is often part of the mating dance; the only problem is, sometimes the woman of the dance is too drunk to actually dance or know that there's even a dance taking place.

There was the night I fell asleep in a flat at seventeen years old. The whole place was full of cigarette smoke. The Benson and Hedges appreciation party. I was really drunk. It was a Friday night. I went to that flat all the time, most weekends, and I knew the guys that lived there. I knew them well. They were my friends. It was safe to crash there. I had planned to go home but ended up curled on the sofa. I awoke to someone grabbing my ass and my pussy, hands everywhere. It took me a second to register that I was in fact awake and not dreaming. I sat up with a start and there at the end of the

couch was one of the guys from the flat. He withdrew his arms and left the room. I told my other friends what had happened and they didn't believe me. He would never do that. He wasn't that kind of guy.

There was the night in Wellington at nineteen years old when I was drunk and called a taxi from a payphone to take me back to my flat. I rested my head on the window and looked outside at the blurry street lights and the rain falling. When we pulled up to my block of houses in Island Bay, I handed my money through the gap in the front two seats and as I did so the taxi driver grabbed my arm hard and pulled me towards him through the gap. I had to fight him to get away. I hit his head with my other arm and used my foot as a lever to pull free. I jumped out the door and ran down an alley in my high heels. His car was still running and I heard the door open and him get out. But I knew the area better than him. I jumped a fence and did a loop back to my place. The door was open. I closed and locked it behind me then went to bed. I couldn't remember the name of the taxi company or the driver's name. I didn't report it.

Those guys didn't care that I was drunk. They were pleased. I was vulnerable.

The Tipping Point

I was thirty four when I decided that I would have to quit drinking or it would kill me. I had gone out with my friend Dana for lunch. But the story doesn't start at lunch. It probably starts years before, the first time one of my mother's friends mentioned my bum was getting bigger. Or maybe the story starts just before Christmas when all the food came out to celebrate the festivities of Jesus being born – a story that no one in my family seems to believe in, though, we continue to celebrate along with everyone else in that frazzled, rushed way that people celebrate. Maybe it even started when I was first conceived and my genetics were made up to be prone to addiction. Whenever it started, the endless pull to be thinner had got to me after Christmas. I needed to be thinner. I would go on a detox. In my overheating tent in Opunake, with my mobile data on, I ordered a detox off the internet for the hefty price of over 200 dollars, then I got into my togs and went for a swim in the sea. At Opunake, you can jump over waves in the sunshine while looking at snow-peaked Mt Taranaki. After my swim, I lay in the sun on my lounge drinking gin and tonics and reading.

I was excited when I got home from holiday and my package arrived. Blue homeopathic bottles. I don't even believe in homeopathy. Homeopathy is for stupid people who believe the more you dilute a substance the more powerful it gets. So why did I buy something I didn't believe in off the internet? I'd try anything once to lose weight.

Once I got home and began to do the detox, it became apparent that I could pretty much eat fuck all. But I'd committed and I would see it through. Over the 10 days I lost 4kg. I was hungry and cranky. Dana invited me for lunch. Of course I would go – she's one of my besties. The weather was fine, my detox was finished and who doesn't love a bit of day drinking? I got there early. Dana, true to form, was running late so I sat happily in the sun with a glass of bubbly. By the time Dana arrived I'd had two. We looked over the Wellington water and there was only a slight breeze as opposed to Wellington's traditional hurricane wind. I was happy and content.

“What are you ordering?” asked Dana

“Something without carbs.”

There was an eel salad on the menu – different, but for sure the least fattening of all the options. I had never eaten eel before, it was cut into square chunks and sprinkled over lettuce. It was sweetish and light but meaty at the same time, almost muscular rather than fatty. I read somewhere that eels are a symbol of inner wisdom. They can slither across land. Many of the eels in my local Waikanae river have changed sex due to women peeing out their birth control pill hormones. You can feed the eels at Nga Manu nature reserve and watch their triangular mouths and small sharp teeth turn the meat into slush. I didn't care about that at the time though. I just wanted to be thinner.

I drank a total of four wines over the course of lunch. That's four wines on a pretty much empty stomach (that had been empty for ten days) and after lunch I was going to visit my parents at their home and stay the night. Dana and I talked about our lives, her recent year long trip to pretty much everywhere in the world, the struggle to

find a house they could afford to buy and her husband's frustration at his job. I talked about my work and my dad's cancer treatment, how beautiful and tall my daughter was getting and how well she was doing in school.

When Dana and I went to leave, I gave her a slurry hug and went on my merry way back to Mum and Dad's where there would be a gathering of various family members. The journey was far more enjoyable than it would have been sober, I wandered looking at things in shops before I caught the bus. One of the participants in the Alcohol Consumption study used soap as an example of how alcohol makes everything more fun: "you know how soap, I don't know if you ever used to watch like um Sesame Street or those kids' science programmes. They explained soap as working so well because it makes water wetter. Like it, I dunno, it gets between the molecules and the weave of fabric and crap like that and works better. It [alcohol] kind of makes fun times more fun, if that makes sense. Like it makes you happier, it makes you more personable"³⁴. I was happy on that bus ride home.

I arrived back at my parents house with a spring in my step and greeted my daughter, the nephews, my brothers, my parents, my husband, my aunty.

"How much have you had to drink?" asked my husband.

"Three wines."

To be fair to myself, I wasn't quite myself. The last few months had been intense. Dad's illness had affected me obviously but I'd dealt with it all with a smile on my face and a forced positivity. And now it was all over. Dad was home, the isolation

³⁴Lyons & Willott 700

room just a bad dream. He was supposedly getting better. The leukaemia was gone. His hair was growing back. I could breathe – sort of. But I hadn't dealt with anything properly. Having my whole family together at Mum and Dad's was such a relief and quite overwhelming because I had truly believed that my dad wouldn't make it home from the hospital. His prognosis hadn't been good. The palliative care team had been involved and yet here he was, sitting in the living room with the rest of my family. It was all too much – feelings were surging up, feelings I couldn't deal with. My aunty offered me a wine and I said yes.

The afternoon wore on into evening. My mum took me aside and told me to stop drinking. My daughter hid the last non-empty bottle of wine from me. My brothers ignored me. Fine. If they didn't want to speak to me I would go and call Lisette. I needed to talk to her anyway. It had become apparent that one of her kids was a little shit. The last time he had come to my house his behaviour was appalling and this was the perfect time to tell her. After all, I was an expert on parenting: look at my beautiful daughter who I'd never had any trouble with. The time was now. Two bottles in. I wouldn't be brave enough otherwise.

“Hey,” I breathed down the phone.

“Oh hey, how are you?”

“Good, listen I need to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

“I need to talk to you about your son's behaviour.”

“Um okay...”

“Look, I need to be honest with you. It’s not good. He breaks things and lies and no one is going to like him if he stays like that. He’s not going to have any friends. Other parents won’t want to invite him over. He’s just not a very nice kid.”

At some point, I heard the hurt in her voice but I kept going.

“You need to sort it out. He needs more boundaries. More discipline.”

Then it dawned on her.

“Are you drunk?”

“No. I’ve only had three wines.”

The ironies of drinking are many. I behaved much, much worse than my friend’s son ever did. *He* didn’t come to my house, upset everyone and vomit all over my carpet. *He* didn’t hurt anyone’s feelings. My behaviour was the problem. Not his. She hung up on me. In the middle of the night, I sat up in bed and made an effort to untangle myself from the sheets and get to the bathroom but I didn’t make it that far. I vomited all over the dressing table and plush cream carpet of mum and dad’s guest bedroom then just went back to sleep.

We had to drive home to our house the next day and as I vomited into a bucket a thought slapped me on the back. My best friend was angry with me. My parents were angry with me. My brothers were angry with me. My husband was angry with me (he had cleaned up the vomit). My daughter was angry with me. *I* was angry with me. It was when my husband hit the brakes at the lights (probably a little too hard) and my face lurched closer to my own spew that the thought hit me: You are going to lose everyone you love if you keep behaving like this.

And there it was.

But what if I don't care? What if sometimes I just want every single person I have ever known or loved to go away so that I can be alone with alcohol? What if I am secretly sometimes not sure who or what I love more? What if my husband gave me an ultimatum? "It's me or the booze." Would I choose him? I'm not sure.

The Red House Cafe

“Often I look at the world

And I am dumbfounded that anyone can function at all.”³⁵

- Hera Lindsay Bird

My first teaching job was with a class of Year 1 students. A room full of six year olds with gappy teeth. Most of the other women teachers had bobs and wore hippy, floaty skirts to hide their Type A personalities. After being a stay-at-home mum and in charge of myself and my life for five years, it was hard to go back to having a boss. Especially a Type A, bob wearing boss. But I loved working with children. I am never more comfortable than in the company of children. They make me happy. I love the way their minds work. I love asking them questions to see what they're thinking and I love their replies.

Madi, a tiny mouse of a creature with glasses too big for her face, came to me covered in water. Keira was the culprit.

“Keira, why did you spit water all over Madi?”

Keira looked down at the ground with her blonde head.

“Come on, tell me.”

³⁵ Bird 32

She looked up and replied in a clear, sing-song voice, “The water was so cold in my mouth, I just had to spit it all over Madi.”

Fair enough.

The Monday afternoon team meetings were never interesting and never, ever cancelled – no matter what. That particular Monday was hot. The kind of day you wanted to knock off early and go to the beach. But no, we had to discuss handwriting, the topic of the day’s meeting.

“We know we underline the date in red but should we get the students to write the full date?” The team leader demonstrated on the board: 18th February 2009, and underlined it in red. I looked around. Was this a joke?

“Or we could do it like this...”

18th February 2009

“Or what about...”

18/2/2009

“Could the kids choose how they want to do it?” I asked.

My team leader looked at me, confused, “No. Every class has to do it the same.”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Won’t handwriting be obsolete in a few years anyway?” I joked.

Only Kelly laughed.

My classroom was long and thin with only boxed windows and a door at either end. The fluorescent lights were relentless but if the kids and I turned them off the room was too dark. We would escape outside, under the trees at the far end of the field to do our reading. I loved teaching the children to read, watching their small fingers follow the lines of the words, seeing the code in front of them begin to make sense.

I guess I was naive. The school was rich and white. There were so many rules I couldn't remember them all – and that was just for the teachers.

“One of the boys in my class has forgotten his togs.” I had run over to the office quickly. I had a suspicion that he didn't have any togs. “Is there a spare pair anywhere? Like in the lost property or something?”

The office lady looked at me like I was crazy.

“Um, no...”

“Okay thanks.”

I ran back to my class and hustled the nineteen children to the pool with their plastic bags of togs and their sun hats on their heads. Which is, in fact, like herding cats.

“Ryan, why have you only got one shoe on?”

He looked at his feet, confused, then back up at me, confused.

“Just take that one off too and walk in bare feet.”

He nodded.

“Right, let's go.”

The boy with no togs sat on the side of the pool looking at his feet dangling in the blue, blue water while the rest of the children played and swam. My team leader (with her blonde bob and floaty skirt) came into my classroom that afternoon to speak to me.

“The office ladies informed me that you were looking for a spare pair of togs today.”

“Yeah, one of my boys forgot his. I think he might not have any at all.”

“Well, we don’t provide togs. If the children don’t bring them then they can’t swim.”

“Oh, okay. I thought maybe there could be some in lost property.”

“No. There’s not. And I also need to talk to you about keeping your classroom tidier.”

I think I’m in the wrong school, I thought.

That afternoon, I took Lily to the shops and we picked out a nice pair of swimming shorts and a towel for the boy which I kept clean and ready in the classroom. He loved swimming.

Even though I didn’t really like the school, Lily was going there and I had started to make friends so it wasn’t too bad. There was Kelly on the right of me whose long, dark, fluorescent class matched my own. She claimed that she never wore any underwear. We would escape out the high fences at morning tea and lunch to get coffee. She was new that year too. We did our morning tea and lunch duties together and bonded.

“How are you finding this school?” I asked her.

“I hate it,” she replied.

I laughed and we were friends. Our other friends were Frank and Matt. On either ends of our block of classrooms. Matt was nice and kind and funny with dark curly hair. We got along well plus I wanted to fuck him. I didn't. But I wanted to. Kelly and I had drinks on the weekend. Frank had a new baby girl at home who he liked to show us pictures of and brag about. We found our own corner in the staffroom where we could laugh and make fun.

From my teaching salary, I finally had money! I could buy clothes and new furniture for our house. My home was my castle and this was a happy time for my little family. While I wasn't looking, Henry had grown up. He asked me to marry him and I said yes. He kept getting promoted at work. He kept becoming the man I needed him to be and one day I realised I could trust him.

One night, at the end of a long teaching day, I was sitting on the couch with a wine when the phone rang. It had been a normal day. Kelly, Matt and I had gone for coffee at morning tea and bitched about everyone we hated at school. During lunch, we played table tennis on the table we had set up in the staff room and it had been competitive as usual. Frank had been reading a magazine and held up the page of some recipe he liked.

“You should get your wife to cook it,” Kelly said as she hit the little white ball back to me.

“Maybe I could leave it on her pillow as a hint,” he laughed.

“I’m sure that would go down well,” Matt said.

At the staff meeting after school, Frank had pulled up a picture of his baby girl on his laptop screen and held the chocolate fish he was eating up to her mouth so it looked like she was eating it. We snickered.

The phone would be my mum. It was around that hour that she usually called. It wasn’t my mum. It was the principal of my school.

“I have some bad news.”

“What is it?”

I searched my mind but I had no idea what it could be.

“Frank’s been killed. He was biking home and was hit by a drunk driver.”

“Oh.”

I saw his hand with the chocolate fish.

I saw the recipe he was going to put on his wife’s pillow so she could cook it for him.

I saw him.

Gone! Just like that.

He had left school at 5pm.

I got drunk after that phone call. And I cried.

The woman who killed Frank was an alcoholic. She was a grandmother. She was driving after drinking around two bottles of wine. She couldn’t stay in her lane.

The caretaker from our school was driving home at the same time and was right behind the car that hit Frank. He saw Frank hit and killed. He saw his body and bike fly through the air and land on the left hand side of the road next to the Red House Cafe in Te Horo. He had seen the car swerving in front of him and thought “What the hell are they up to?” He was the first to pull over.

The lady just sat in her car, he said. She didn’t get out. He went over to Frank but there was nothing he could do and he couldn’t take looking at him, couldn’t take seeing him like that. Another car pulled over and that person called the police. The caretaker went over to the car. The woman looked straight ahead. He thought she was in shock. He opened her door and started to talk to her and ask her if she was okay and what had happened. That’s when he realised she was drunk. He started to scream at her and try to pull her out of the car. The other bystander pulled him back.

“What the fuck are you doing, mate?”

“She’s drunk,” he yelled “She’s bloody drunk.”

“Oh,” said the bystander.

“She was so drunk,” the caretaker told us as he sat on the couch in the staffroom, “I could smell it on her.”

After Frank’s funeral, which was held in the school hall, I went to the gate to wait to be picked up. I hadn’t driven for some reason. The day was so sweet, sunny with just the

smallest hint of wind. All of a sudden there was a woosh and a bird flew down and past me, so close that its wing touched my chest. I got a fright.

“What kind of bird is that” I asked aloud to no one.

A teenage boy appeared out of nowhere, “It’s a Kereru,” he said.

The Red House Cafe burnt down a while back now.

Strangers

I want to drink every single day. I wake up in the morning and I think, wouldn't it be nice to have wine tonight. Throughout the day, my brain battles with itself about whether I can drink that evening. My body yearns for it. It asks for it. My hands grip the steering wheel tight as I drive. I can't have any alcohol in the house whatsoever. If I meet a friend for a coffee at a cafe in the afternoon, I have to stop myself ordering a glass of wine instead.

This is why treatment and recovery is so important. Because you need it daily. You need people who understand what you are going through and how hard the battle really is. And mostly, it's an invisible battle. I get dressed up pretty everyday for work, I do my hair and make-up and I smile and have fun. No one I come into contact with would have any idea about what's going on inside my head. I went to AA three times. The first time I was there, I saw a dad of one of the kids in my class. The second time I saw my chiropractor – a big strong man who could lift me like a baby and crunch me into the position I should have been in in the first place.

The third time I went I saw her. She wore a pink cardigan and pearls. Her hair was cut in a long grey bob. I knew who she was straight away. I'd seen her on the news and in the paper. We sat in a circle. We went around. My name's blah blah and I'm an alcoholic. We confessed our sins. We said how we were getting on.

I cleared my throat: "My name is Mariana and I'm an alcoholic."

“Hi Mariana.”

“But I keep forgetting. That’s my problem. I go for ages and then I forget I’m an alcoholic and I drink again. I need to remember but it’s hard.”

People nodded and my chiropractor agreed. “It’s hard for me to remember too. I poured myself a beer the other night and put it in front of me but my wife came out before I was about to drink it and the look in her eyes was fear. Pure fear so I got up and tipped it down the sink. She never forgets.”

Then it was her turn. This old and innocent looking lady, “I’ve been pottering in my garden. I’m enjoying my roses. I wake up and I have a cup of tea.”

She said nothing about him. Not. A. Word. Why was everyone being so nice to her? Nodding and giving her little smiles. She was a fucking murderer. Frank doesn’t get to have a cup of tea and play in his garden or wear any stupid pearls around his dead neck. My neck got hot. I couldn’t handle it. I stood up abruptly and my chair screeched. I left and never went back to an AA meeting again. Of all the people in there, she should never forget.

“Fuck AA,” I thought as I walked quickly to my car, grabbing my keys out of my handbag as I went.

“Fuck AA,” I thought as I fumbled with my lock and threw my handbag on the passenger seat.

“Fuck AA and fuck her. I’m not going anywhere that I have to sit across from her and pretend she’s not some bitch who stole my friend’s life and only went to jail for a couple of years. Fuck her. And fuck her for stealing my AA meeting. Can’t she find

another meeting? She's already fucked her life. I'm still in the process of fucking mine. I need that meeting more than she does."

But I shouldn't have judged, should I? For there, but for the grace of God, go I.

So where did I go? After AA? I went home and I turned on my computer. If you can't find recovery options in real life, you can find them on the internet. The strangers I know. And as always, I turned to books. I found Mary Karr and Ann Dowsett-Johnston and Lotta Dann and Lucia Berlin. These women drunks, these writers. These strangers I know.

Crone

“God doesn’t need to punish us. He just grants us a long enough life to punish ourselves.”³⁶

- Barbara Kingsolver

What will happen to me when I grow old? Who will I be? Could I become her? That old woman who has killed a man? That old woman with the white grey hair and the pearls and the pink cardigan who potters in her garden. Is that the path I’m on right now? I have driven drunk. I had to drive drunk because I needed to get out of my house. I needed to get away. So I got my keys and I walked down the stairs and out onto the road where my car was waiting for me. It was shiny. I liked the feel of the car keys in my hand and I liked the sound they made when I put them in the lock. I could have gone anywhere with my keys and my car but I just drove to the four square and got another bottle of wine. Then I drove to the beach and sat on the sand that had gotten colder since the sun went down and I drank my wine out of the bottle. That night, I drove drunk down little town roads but could I one day keep driving and make it onto the highway? Could I kill?

I can already see the signs of aging, the lines around my eyes, the way my hair doesn’t shine like it used to. I watch my daughter become a woman. I watch her bloom. I

³⁶ Kingsolver 276

watch her preen in the mirror for hours. She is a beautiful bird. While she blooms, I am starting to fade.

To become an old woman. Isn't that the point of it all? To not die. To stay here in the world for as long as possible. But the longer I'm here, the more mistakes I could potentially make. Will Mariaba grow old? Or will she die and leave me in peace to age alone? I could be a great old woman. I could go walking and wear sunglasses with red rims. I could go to gallery openings and write and write and write. I could have my grandchildren to stay. I could listen to National Radio. I could read all of the books.

Or I could drink.

The Change

It was around the three month mark that I realised my dad wasn't in fact dead. Of course he wasn't! It just couldn't be that way so my mind seemed to flick a switch. I could still call him because Mum hadn't cancelled his cellphone plan and he would answer at the end of seven rings.

“Hi, I'm not available right now. Leave me a message and I'll get back to you.”

He wasn't available right *now*. But he *would* get back to me. I just had to wait. Surely on my birthday he would call. He didn't but maybe he was busy. Maybe he was on a long holiday and couldn't get to his phone. Forever is the longest time and it was as if my brain could not deal with it so it wiped information. I forgot about the coffin and my father's body in my parents' living room. I forgot about the smell of death mixed with new carpet. I forgot about the hospital and most importantly I forgot about the funeral because if that never happened then it just couldn't be. I saved up things to tell him. I started an art class. Lily stuck her lips into a shot glass and suctioned them for three minutes and then when they popped out they were huge. I found her with swollen blue lips and they took a day to go down properly. She told me it was the Kylie Jenner lip challenge. I had a fight with Henry. I wanted to tell Dad. One of my brother's was pissing me off. I would tell Dad the next time I saw him.

Alcohol helped me to do this pretending, I would get home from work, do the chores, hang out with my Lily and Henry, go to the gym or walk the dog and then I

would drink. How could I be mad at alcohol when it was so helpful to me? Why had I ever thought badly of it? How had I not realised that instead of it being my enemy, it was my saviour?

Then one evening while I was outside bringing in a load of washing, a tui flew so close to my head that its wings sounded like a purerehua and I knew then that Dad was dead, he would always be dead now. He had become imaginary. I had to sit down on the grass while the washing blew in the wind above my head. It took me a long time to get up.

Christmas

“Whenever someone who knows you disappears, you lose one version of yourself. Yourself as you were seen, as you were judged to be... those who know us construct us, and their several knowings slant the different facets of our characters like diamond-cutter's tools.”³⁷

- Salman Rushdie.

The first Christmas is supposed to be hard without a loved one. Last Christmas I got Dad a pair of Barkers trackpants, size small because he had lost so much weight from the leukaemia and even then they were baggy on him. He put them on and modelled them for us, walking around with his bald head like a model.

“They look lovely,” Mum said.

“Why, thank you,” he said.

This Christmas he wasn't there and the emptiness of his La-Z-Boy chair was so massive it seemed to take over the room. But our family loves Christmas and we had the kids so the Santa sacks came out and we laughed and we ate chocolate for breakfast and we did the treasure hunt that Mum organises each year and we made it fun and happy. Because we are a family. We opened what seemed like a million presents until they were all gone

³⁷ Rushdie 510

and we felt like we needed to go back to bed after all the excitement. But there was one more present under the tree. It was for me.

“Who’s that one from?”

“Well,” Mum smiled, “It’s from Dad.”

“What do you mean?”

“He bought it for you for Christmas earlier in the year. He found it in his favourite shop near the hospital that he used to like to visit. He said you would love it.”

What could it be? He never bought me presents. It was Mum who for all our lives had done the Christmas and birthday shopping. I couldn’t recall ever being given a present from Dad. What was it that he thought I would love? What was it he had found at the shop near the hospital that he felt so compelled to buy for me. I opened it slowly. Inside the wrapping was a writing notebook, a grey colour and on the front of the notebook it said:

“Bitch got Style.”

Madness

*“So God forgive me if I confess that once in a while I get a diabolical urge to, well, mess it all up.”*³⁸

- Lucia Berlin

It must be so freeing to go completely mad. To just lose all sense of what is and what isn't. To let your mind go to the dark and mysterious places that you actively stop it from going. To let yourself loose in the caves, or the maze or the trenches. Other women have gone there. Sometimes I feel it is alcohol that stops me from going completely mad. It is alcohol that calms me and holds me back from going over (or under). At other times I feel that it is alcohol leading me there, calling me into the inbetween, the darkness, the madness.

I swing wildly from wanting control and wanting to lose control. I struggle with the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous because I hate the thought of handing over any sort of power I've ever had or ever will have. I want to be empowered not disempowered. I'm *looking* for my power. Where is it? Is it under that blue dress I took off last night that lies on my floor? Is it in the same place I put my memories of what it said in my grandmother's letter? I don't know where it is but I want it back. And once I find it I do not want to give it away. But then I swing from wanting to have power and responsi-

³⁸ Berlin 357

bility to wanting none of it — to never wanting or needing to be in charge. To giving up. Because at the moment I haven't given up. I am still trying to beat this addiction, this secret, this problem. We are all keeping secrets, I think. From ourselves, from others. Perhaps my secret is that I want to know what it's like to give up, to let madness take me, to drink and drink and drink and drink until I have nothing and care about no one.

But I can't do that, because I have something. I have a strength I can't name. It's always been there and when I need it, it comes forward like the calm palm of a hand.

My daughter is in a band. She is the singer in amongst other thirteen and fourteen year old talented musicians. They all have the ability to play like child prodigies at the same time as looking bored out of their brains. Jess, the bass player, has a mother who is an alcoholic. Jess films her mum in various states of drunkenness, sometimes comatose, then sends them out to her followers on snapchat. Lily shows them to me. I have seen Cathy, through my mobile phone screen, in all sorts of vulnerable positions: unable to stand up, unable to speak, making toast badly at 2 o'clock in the morning, groaning, vomiting into the toilet. I'm not sure if she knows or remembers she has been filmed so I don't say anything about it when I see her and I never judge her. At the last band practice, at Jess's house, Cathy came down stairs with a champagne flute full to the top with red wine. She was obviously drunk and made a fool of herself, embarrassing Jess and causing the band practice to end early. The next time I had a glass of red wine in my hand, Lily started to cry.

“What's wrong?” I asked her.

It took a while but after coaxing she said, “I don’t want you to end up like Cathy.”

But I had forgotten to tell Lily something. I am strong. People think I am vulnerable and small and need looking after but they are wrong. I have a strength that no one can see. I will be okay. I don’t know how but I know I will be.

Also, I would never drink red wine out of a champagne flute.

Ending

I still drink. I like tidy endings but I can't offer one here. Today it is cold outside because it's almost June. I need to put socks on but instead I sit cross legged and my feet tuck themselves under my body for warmth. I still wake at three am reeling with guilt. I still scrub red wine from my teeth in the morning before I go to work. I still look at myself in the mirror and wonder, *how the fuck did I get here?* Sometimes I think: "Oh well, one day we'll all be dead and none of this will matter." And that makes me laugh because it's quite funny, really, when you think about it. But for some reason, it seems like it does matter, this problem, this story. I didn't want to tell it but I needed to. And one day, I hope this story has a different ending, one where I'm sober and free from the waipiro. I know this story can have a different ending. And I wonder if, like Emily Dickinson supposedly said, the first time you do something a little demon is released. Then I wonder, when you do something for the very last time, does that same demon die?

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