

WASTED: HOW PEER INFLUENCE AND MEDIA MESSAGES CONVERGE TO CREATE
A CLIMATE WHERE ALCOHOL ABUSE APPEARS NORMAL

by

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(Under the Direction of VALERIE BOYD)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interaction between media images of excessive alcohol use and peer influence on an individual alcoholic's ideas about alcohol and alcoholism. Informed by previous research on the relationship between mass media images of alcohol consumption and young people's attitudes about drinking, this paper highlights the significance of newer media forms, such as reality TV and social networking sites, on these attitudes. Through the method of personal narrative, specific experiences are used to illuminate the way media messages and peer influences converge to create an atmosphere where abusing alcohol appears normal.

INDEX WORDS: alcohol abuse, mass media, binge drinking, *Facebook*

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Foreword

When I first sat down to write for my master's thesis, I knew exactly what I wanted to write about. This paper started in a traditional format, academic citations and all. However, as I wrote, I found that distancing myself from my topic was unsatisfying, and I felt the need to incorporate my personal experience. I also believed, and still do, that including my voice added an important layer to what I was writing. Studying mass media's depictions of alcohol use and abuse, and their relationship with young people's attitudes about drinking, was nothing new. Examining peer influences' convergence with media in outlets such as *Facebook* and reality TV was fresh territory, but I questioned why not include the experience of a young person who had grown up and interacted with these very media messages and peer influences? Why not include my own? As an alcoholic who entered recovery in her early twenties, I have been fascinated with the climate that nurtured my nature-given disease, and I set out to examine the media and peer influences that created an atmosphere where my alcoholic drinking was not only okay, but normal. The writing process ended up often scaring me and making me question the wisdom of sharing my past. Ultimately, though, I believe that writing my thesis has been liberating and has helped point the way to my future. This thesis doesn't look like what I envisioned when I began my master's program. Writing with a narrative voice had been shelved during my course work. However, I've learned more while writing this than I have from any other paper, and, in truth, it remains unfinished. I consider this paper a first step in a much bigger project that explores these media messages and peer influences and what happens when a generation is truly a product of the media.

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Preface:

I exhale deeply as I step out onto the sidewalk. It's been a long day. At work phones exploded with questions from anxious applicants, waves of panicked students came in with their problems about graduation or assistantships, and I found myself kicking hard to keep my head above the current rip tide of office gossip.

Outside it's raining. I don't have my umbrella. Puddles claw at the frayed edges of my favorite jeans. Soon I'll have to retire them for good. The sidewalk smells like old onions and spilled beer—a smell that never really fades as it gets refreshed every night by clumsily held bottles and dropped midnight sandwiches.

My head hurts. I need something, something to take the edge off. I know exactly what. Happy Hour. I pull out my phone, 5:14. I'll make it by 5:30 easy.

I drive the short distance and park my '96 Honda Civic. The red dragon, my brother nicknamed it years ago. Whether for its constant snarl, like the warning growl from a wild animal you've come too close to, or because its spoiler and head lights give it a reptilian appearance, I'm still not sure.

People stand outside smoking. I quit, years ago, so I walk through quickly, finding the gray cloud repulsive rather than alluring. I smile at those I know. Most, I recognize. I've been coming to Happy Hour here at least once a week for two years.

I pull open the door and step inside into the muted light. I see Ben,* Susan, Lanie, and Jay, regulars like me. I give them hugs, say hello. They ask me about school. I ask them about their days. It's too early for deeper conversation. I haven't even grabbed a drink yet. Even so I'm

* *all names have been changed.*

beginning to feel the relief of just being there. Susan goes to get a refill for her and Ben. I take a seat. The smokers filter in. The clock ticks 5:30.

Ben sets down his cup. “It’s 5:30,” he says. “Let’s have an AA meeting.”

I relax into my chair. Here, Happy Hour isn’t a name for post-work cocktails; it’s the name of my home group. The cup I clutch holds coffee, not cheap draft beer.

My name is Emilia Bak. I’m 24 years old and I’m an alcoholic.

Deciding to go to AA during my senior year of college and admitting that I wasn’t just a carefree party girl, but someone with a disease wasn’t easy and it didn’t happen overnight.

Alcoholics Anonymous’ literature describes alcoholism as “cunning, baffling and powerful.”

These traits of the illness, among other things, make diagnosing the alcoholic difficult. Today

alcoholism is often confused with what some term binge or irresponsible drinking. I thought I just liked to binge drink. I wasn’t an alcoholic. I didn’t need to drink every day. I just got wasted

at parties, just like everyone else. While all alcohol abuse does not mean someone is an

alcoholic, the path to alcoholism begins with alcohol abuse. Unfortunately, alcohol abuse and

binge drinking are often depicted as normal, even glamorous, in our culture, especially among

college-age people which is a dangerous idea for anyone, but a deadly one for the alcoholic. For

college kids getting trashed is often treated as if it is to be expected, a rite of passage. Surrounded

by drunken alumni on North Campus on game days and wasted co-eds in downtown bars, my

drinking habits *seemed* average, not excessive. When I turned on cocktail-saturated *Sex and the*

City or sang along to Garth Brooks’ hit, “Friends in Low Places,” during Power Hour at Bourbon

Street I felt in good (drinking) company. When I logged onto *Facebook* and saw that the group

“Mr. Boston is My Personal Therapist” had new members, or flipped through my roommate’s

Cosmopolitan and read “Three things to learn from your bartender,” I was reassured that drinking—and drinking a lot—was perfectly normal.

No one really knows what causes alcoholism. Though it was regarded for years as a moral problem, in 1956 the American Medical Association classified alcoholism as a medical disease. It is now often referred to as a family disease, as it is often hereditary, however it is not always. There is no test, no surefire way to predict if a child will or will not have alcoholism. The disease may be biological but environmental influences are certainly not rendered mute when it comes to the drinking behavior of alcoholics. Even if a drop of liquor never brushed past my lips I would have been an alcoholic, but as I look back over my time in active alcoholism I can see where the culture around me condoned my alcohol abuse and at times even encouraged it.

Feminist scholar bell hooks once said “popular culture is where the pedagogy is. It’s where the learning is.” While her statement may seem to imply a belief in strong and direct media effects, she is right in various ways. People today learn a great deal from the media. Messages are filtered and countered with other messages in an inarguably complex process, but mass media acts as an important influence in our lives. Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, D. Charles Whitney, and J. MacGregor Wise pointed out, “people have just three ways to learn. These are personal, direct experience; interpersonal interaction; and media” (311). I wasn’t born knowing how to down tequila shots or order dirty martinis. My parents certainly didn’t instruct me on these things, and when I began drinking my friends were almost as naïve as I was. I learned how to drink and what to drink from the mass media. Did Carrie Bradshaw and company or *Cosmopolitan* or the *Facebook* group “I love beer pong” make me drink? No, I drank because it was fun, because it provided an escape from uncomfortable feelings, because everybody else

did it. But for an alcoholic, drinking stops being fun. Yet when I looked around at my friends and the media I only found that what I thought was causing me problems was shown as normal.

While I was an actively drinking alcoholic I didn't think much about how the media I used or the company I kept helped to create an environment where getting wasted seemed okay. Yet, as I gained time in sobriety, the fog left behind by my alcohol abuse began to clear, and I started to notice how many songs contain lyrics about alcohol and getting drunk, or how the women on *Sex and the City* always seemed to be drinking, or how Meredith on *Grey's Anatomy* got drunk often, or how many ads for alcohol featuring glamorous-looking people there were in magazines and on television, and how many groups related to alcohol there were to join on *Facebook* (over 500). Despite being inundated with messages that promoted alcohol use and in some cases abuse, researchers tell us that it is our peers not the media that are the most significant outside influence on our behaviors such as drinking. I'm sure it is no coincidence that I happened to befriend those who drank like I did or enjoyed media that glamorized drinking like I did.

Setting aside what is more influential than the other, I have wondered what happens when media and peer influences converge? With the rise of reality television and the trend of social media sites, including *Facebook* and *MySpace*, we aren't seeing distant celebrities playing characters who drink excessively. We are seeing "real" people, our age, sometimes people we know, so that can't be classified solely as a mass media message because it's also coming from our peers. Following MTV's *The Real World* with my sorority sisters I watched people my own age, girls from colleges who looked like me, dressed like me, talked like me, and drank like me too, on national television, in almost every episode. The consequences of their drinking included

locking lips with cute cast mates and sometimes embarrassing encounters with law enforcement, but these were soon forgotten.

When I joined *Facebook*, I quickly picked up on the group application. I could express any piece of my personality by clicking “Join Group.” Anyone who looked at my profile could tell from my group list that I frequented Starbucks (“Addicted to Starbucks”) liked to shop (“Shopoholics Unite”) hated UGA buses (“Buses Be Trying Me”) and loved to drink (“OOOOhhh! What Happened Last Night!?”). The members in these *Facebook* groups are college kids my age. They are my classmates, my friends. Whether or not I’ve ever raised my glass to theirs at happy hour, it seemed like through our membership we are all doing the same thing, partying it up like college kids do. But whether you’re an alcoholic or not, abusing alcohol can have consequences that echo throughout a lifetime.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports 31 percent of college students meet the criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse, i.e. binge drinking. This behavior will land some of these students in the county jail for a few hours waiting for friends to bail them out. Some will find themselves picking up trash on downtown streets in citrus-colored vests under the watchful eyes of their probation officers. Some will wake up in strange bedrooms and stumble to the bathroom to quietly call a ride on their cell phones. Some will get a DUI, and then another. Some will have accidents, and others will be assaulted. Some will misplace their keys, licenses or cell phones and will have to shell out money for another key, id or iPhone. Most will only pay the price of a headache, a dry throat or flushed cheeks as they slink into class a few minutes late. A few will overdose and wake up in a hospital. Some will not wake up at all.

But some will get sober. I earned a seat in Alcoholics Anonymous one month after I turned twenty two. The Wednesday night I walked up the creaking wooden stairs of the ancient

house where Happy Hour was held each night at 5:30, changed my life. I finally found people who felt what I felt, who had been through what I had and were able to look into the tiredness and hurt spilling out of my eyes and tell me where I was at the moment was truly terrible but that it could get a whole hell of a lot better. All I had to do was recognize my drinking was not normal, that I had no control once I picked up that can, bottle or wine glass and that I never had to drink again. And they were right. I've never looked back and it did get a whole hell of a lot, unbelievably, impossibly, unimaginably better. But that's the end. First it had to get worse.

Chapter 1: In the Beginning

The impact hits suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere. I'm spinning wildly, like I've been hit by a charging rhinoceros. This is it, I think. I'm dying. This is what it's like to die. My life isn't flashing before me like people say it does in the movies. Instead my mind clutches fiercely to one thought, as if holding it in my mind will make me stay awake, stay alive. I'm not thinking about my parents or my brother or my friends. Their faces, they somehow elude me. Instead I think, "I haven't finished my spread for the yearbook yet. Who will finish it for me?" I don't think this is what you're supposed to be thinking about when you're about to die, unfinished homework. Then my seat collapses and my body bends forward with it. I shut my eyes tight. And wait.

"We have a baby girl."

Twenty-four years ago my father said these words to my mother, as many fathers do, beaming with happiness when their daughters, their little girls, appear into this world. Even though she knew the day would eventually come, my mother, as mothers are, was overwhelmed with unspeakable joy at becoming a parent, a mother to a baby girl, for the first time. However typical my father's announcement may seem, his words are the only typical thing about my announcement into the world, because in fact it was merely my announcement into *their* world. My father was not holding me, gazing at his newborn daughter when he announced to my mother that they had a baby girl. And my mother was not lying in a hospital bed, exhausted from giving birth. My introduction to my parents came through a phone call. A woman named Natalia who helped young, single and pregnant women without any options, called my father to tell him. He then phoned my mother at work to tell her the exciting news that they finally had a baby, born

about a month earlier on February 24th in Natal, Brazil, an area in the northeast known for its beautiful beaches, but also for its gruesome poverty.

In Brazil there isn't really a middle class to speak of the way there exists in America. This phenomenon where one is either prosperous or impoverished is seen in many South American countries and others around the world. While visiting Brazil to adopt me, my parents stayed in a resort complete with an exotic bird room while out on the street a teenage girl with an enlarged club foot begged for food and money. My mother says she still wonders what happened to that girl, where she slept, what she ate, if she was still alive. My birth mother worked as a maid and simply had no way to care for a child on her own. I would stay in Natal until April, not with her but well cared for by Natalia's daughter, Olivia, awaiting my new family. My young birth mother, about twenty years old, retreated back to her life and the favelas feeling, what? I may never know. In pictures she looks strikingly like me and her smile is so happy, girlishly pure. It's not the smile of a woman who bears the life that she does. Some years after my adoption, she found herself pregnant again. Instead of turning their backs on her a second time for being pregnant and unmarried, her family decided to help and she was able to keep my baby brother or sister.

Domestic and foreign adoption are commonplace today, and being adopted and being Brazilian have been important in shaping my identity, for what they have told me about myself, but perhaps more importantly for what they haven't. Today alcoholism is recognized not only as a disease, but a family disease. I will most likely never know if alcoholism runs in my biological family. I have no notion of who my biological father might be and all I have of my birth mother are two old Polaroid pictures and a tattered letter she wrote to my mother. It's one of my biological mysteries, whether this disease has been passed down like a cursed family heirloom

that though it always brings bad luck no one seems to be able to get rid of it or if it was a stroke of random and unfortunate biological chance. Either way it's mine to keep, or cope with rather.

I was spared a life I don't dare to think about, if I would have survived at all. Child mortality is almost double in the northeast than for the rest of Brazil. Luck or fate or both placed me with a loving supportive family and in a pleasant childhood remarkable in its unremarkability.

We were a close-knit family of four. A year and a half after my adoption, my parents adopted a baby boy, my brother, from Paraguay. Though I was not exactly enamored of the idea at first, my brother and I became fast friends. My mom loves recounting the story of how she and my father demonstrated to me with plastic toy people and a small airplane model that we were going to fly far away and add one more, David, to our family. I threw the fourth apple juice figure across the room exclaiming "No, -David!" Despite my misgivings I loved him immediately, and though I fulfilled my duty as taunting older sister quite well, we were each other's constant companion through childhood.

Childhood passes in a flurry. Maybe that's why we can only remember snapshots. Ballet lessons, Sesame Street, soccer games, Barbie, straight A report cards, Dad's weekend pancakes, summer camp, saxophone, Granny and Papa's, American Girl Dolls, Patchy and Ginger, pretending not to be afraid on rides at Disney World, Easter egg hunts, Goosebumps books, carefully picking out my outfit for the first day of middle school, my first slow dance, crushes, prank calls, cheerleading, sleepovers, and more summer camp.

And then before you can say high school or driver's permit, childhood was over. On the last day of eighth grade I remember walking with my friend Jeff away from Renfro for the last

time. It was warm and bright in the June afternoon sunshine. I remember thinking, “That’s it. Middle school is over. We’re high schoolers now.” Whatever that meant.

That first year of high school held first kisses with my first boyfriend, the cutest boy at school, getting elected class president, and being one of the few freshmen to make the varsity drill team. This meant I had the privilege of dancing in a little blue and white dress, with gold sequins and white boots every Friday night at halftime with the whole town watching. Decatur as a town is small and quirky. Unlike other high schools, drill team ruled as *the* girl’s athletic activity while cheerleading was second rate. Over a hundred girls would turn up at try-outs, but only about 30 made the cut. Getting on drill team guaranteed me status as a cute girl and introduced me to upperclassmen that would become my friends. It was the highlight of my Friday nights and my freshmen year. Still personally unexposed to alcohol, I had girlfriends over for snacks and late night gossip fests after games. Drinking was something certain girls did, but not me. I made straight A’s and was devoted to ballet and swim team, not boys and booze.

As football season drew to a close there came first homecomings, a driver’s permit, a belly button ring, first love and first heartbreak. It was time to try-out again for drill team when my boyfriend of a year, Drew, broke-up with me in the student parking lot after school one day. We were saying goodbye.

“I love you,” I said.

Drew didn’t say anything for a minute, then “I did...love you.”

My heart lurched and I felt my eyes filling endlessly with hot liquid as he proceeded to break-up with me. My teammate Christina, who saw the whole thing told me to get it together, because we had try-outs. I lost a boyfriend that day, but it was also the beginning of my close friendship with Christina. She was right. I got it together and we both made the team again. That

weekend, I listened to my and Drew's mixed-tape repeatedly. I pulled my mattress on the floor and slept on it without a sheet. Today I still can't explain why that helped heal me. Maybe I was trying to ground myself.

Not too long after our break-up, during my sophomore year I would find a new source of comfort, much more effective than pulling my mattress onto the floor. I would find that comfort in alcohol.

My first drink was not unusual or special or memorable for any other quality other than it was the first. My friends now recall similar experiences of trying a drink or two with friends around the age of 15 or being given tastes by parents at holidays. Some were on Spring Break, while others were celebrating New Year's. I was sleeping over at my friend Ashley's house. At the time we were best friends. She had gone away for several months with her family to India but was back by the start of high school. We were inseparable. My mother however hated her and thought among other things that she was a bad influence.

We were in Ashley's room, as usual. It's true that teenagers never leave their rooms except to go over to a friend's house and hang out in their room. Ashley's room was really the basement and had been converted into a bedroom. We only appeared upstairs every few hours to toast a piece of cinnamon raisin swirl bread or refill our water glasses.

We'd stayed up late talking about clothes, boys, classmates, what we wanted our lives to be like when we were grown ups, clothes again. Ashley's parents were asleep upstairs when she pulled out a very small bottle of khalua, like the ones you find on airplanes. It may have been on the plane returning home from India that she had purloined this little bottle.

Somehow Ashley already knew how to drink khalua. We fixed mugs of heated milk and she split the contents of the bottle into each of our cups. I remember it tasted foreign and it

burned my throat a little. I can't remember if I liked it. If I didn't, I probably said I did. Ashley had that affect on me. She was more experienced than I was. I always wanted to be seen as equal in the grown-up things she already knew about, but we never would be equals. While she calmly sipped from her mug and kept gossiping as if we were sipping hot chocolate, I kept thinking I heard her parents coming downstairs, that they somehow knew what we were up to. They never did though. Any creaking on the stairs was caused by her moody cat. I continued to force small sips until my drink grew cold and Ashley stood up to rinse our mugs in the sink.

With a strict curfew and an even stricter policy of knowing where I was going, who I was going with and how long we would be there, I didn't get drunk until sophomore year of high school. An upperclassman girl was throwing a party and since we were friends I could tell my mother where I was going without having to lie. Sober or drunk I would never be good at not telling the truth. Try as I might to hide, my heart always glowed brightly from my sleeve like a smoldering brand.

Before the party I got ready at Ashley's, gossiping and doing our make-up. Her walls were covered in magazine pages. At home so were mine, so were many teenaged girls' but I thought it was unique, creative and cool. Pictures of Gisele in Dolce and Gabbana and tropical beach scenes and Dior ads were splashed about, colorful and crooked with the wrinkled edge from the magazine spine still intact. The pictures coating my walls formed a neat rectangle across my room. They were not taped up randomly like Ashley's. In my room no two pictures could be next to each other that were too alike or that had similar colors. The section I prized most was made up of solely of Evian ads, my favorite of an underwater mermaid drinking bottled water.

In his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini wrote that “time is the most unforgiving of fires.” I might argue that, at least for me, time has been matched by alcohol if not surpassed by it. Vodka, beer, rum, boxed wine and whiskey have blurred many more memories than time. Together the two have dissolved most of what happened the first time I got drunk. What I do remember was three, maybe four Mike’s Hard Lemonades and/or Smirnoff Ices, followed by a warm sensation in forehead and cheeks and my esophagus burning just slightly with each sip. Standing outside and chatting with my friends in the Georgia night, I was drunk quickly, laughing a little too loud, acting a little too silly, and drawing a few stares from my classmates. I didn’t care though. I knew that this was it. Despite the giggles in my voice and having to dash back inside to pee a lot, I had found what had been missing. My affair with alcohol hadn’t been love at first drop, but it was certainly love with first sauce.

“Maybe you should sit down,” my friend Ethan said. He put a hand on my shoulder and I felt my body plop down hard into a small yellow chair, like the ones kids have in outdoor play houses. The same ones I used to have. The noise I made caused a few people to look, but I just laughed, too loud perhaps, as Evan gave me an odd look.

The party rolled on. Our supply dwindled. A girl named Heather had more to drink. This was a girl I barely looked at sideways in the halls at school. I don’t think I’d uttered a word to her since middle school. But she had more alcohol, so she was suddenly worth my interest and my fake smiles. Ashley and I followed her outside to her boyfriend’s car to drink more. Curfew was coming up fast. I drank quickly, feeling sillier by the moment. I laughed. Ashley slapped me several times to get me straight. Not really that hard, but even through the alcohol it stung. More than anything my feelings were hurt that she would hit me so roughly. It was the first time she had hurt me, but it would be far from the last. For a second I was mad at her, didn’t like her,

didn't trust this person who called herself my best friend, my twin. But the feeling faded away with the stinging of the slap.

The next day after downing a couple of Advil for my headache I called Ethan. I felt sheepish as I punched his number into the black portable phone. Ethan and I had been friends since elementary school and he had been not-so-secretly in love with me since about fifth grade. I loved him dearly as a friend, but hadn't had genuine feelings about any boy I'd met or dated since Drew.

"You were acting kind of silly," Ethan said through the phone.

"Yeah, I know... Sorry."

"Just be careful with that."

It was then that I felt the first flames of alcohol-induced shame flushing my face. In six years I would know the heat of that alcoholic shame very well. But for the moment I didn't really understand the correlation of the drinks to the guilt. By the time we hung up, the shame had faded and I was biding my time until I could party again.

“Well, I’ve got friends in low places
Where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases
My blues away,
And I’ll be okay.
Well, I’m not big on social graces.
Think I’ll slip on down to the oasis.
Yeah, I’ve got friends
In low places.”

-Garth Brooks

Chapter 2- Getting Acquainted

Someone is yelling. Hands are on my arms, pulling me. Pulling me out of my car. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" My eyes focus on an Indian man in front of me. "I, I think I'm okay," I stutter. "Why did you do that? We thought you'd be dead." I'm not saying much just staring. My car is in the middle of the road. There is glass everywhere. There's a truck, big and silver also in the middle of the road, with its front fender crunched up. There are more men. A man with grey hair comes up. "Are you okay. Why, why did you do that?" He is kind to me despite what just happened. He has daughters that make mistakes too. Then there's a police officer. He's young. "Do we need to call an ambulance?" "I'm fine I say. Really I'm fine." The Indian man again, "I just knew you'd be dead." I start to apologize and fake cry as it dawns on me what has happened. I have hit the tall man with grey hair in his truck. I didn't even see him because I was so drunk. Another man from the group of men speaks and puts his arm around me. "It's ok hone. It's ok." But I know that it's not.

Country music was my absolute favorite in high school. My family suffered years of car rides as I sang well out of pitch to Tim McGraw and Rascal Flatts. There was not one song that came on Kicks 101.5 that I didn't know the words to. When a budding relationship didn't work out with a boy, my cd player spun Jodi Messina for weeks. When I had a new crush, only Faith Hill could capture my exuberance. When I was down but wanted to be up, Garth Brooks drawling about getting high and crashing a wedding reception was like a comfort blanket. But when true upheaval rocked my emotional life I only found comfort in silence.

It was during sophomore year that my mother and father called my brother and me into the office to find my mother in tears. I had never seen her cry like that before except at my grandmother's funeral.

"Tell them," she said as David and I sat on the futon.

I saw my brother's eyes go wide. In one thousand lifetimes I would have never guessed what I was about to hear. My father was leaving. My parents were separating. I had never even seen them fight. It would take two years for them to finally divorce and much longer for me to understand that there are some things that you will never understand. But being a teenager I stuffed my grief over my shattered family into fighting with my mother and drinking when I had the chance.

Unhappy news colored sophomore year. It was during school one morning when Ashley told me the only thing that could startle me more than my parent's sudden separation.

"Mary has a tumor. It's cancer. They're going to operate and take it out."

"What? Really?" I asked stunned.

Mary's leg had been bothering her when she ran and she had gone to the doctor, but a tumor, cancer? I remember that I didn't process the information correctly and still felt like it wasn't real, that it was like Mary had a sprained ankle or a broken wrist when I repeated what I knew to my mother that afternoon in CVS.

Ashley and I walked around to the back hall where Mary sat with some friends. I didn't say much. Mary and I were friends but we had grown apart since an inseparable phase in middle school. I was always afraid a silly argument that I didn't let her forget the whole time we were at camp the summer after sixth grade was the cause of our drifting apart. Before I ever drank I had an irrational and spiteful side that would appear ever so often, that would blow the littlest of

things into offenses deserving of giving someone long term silent treatment. By the time I was a champ at chugging lite beer this mean side would appear after drinking and the silent treatment I used to give had grown up into a cursing tirade.

I'd finally forgiven Mary when my Jack Russell, Patchy, was run over in the street outside our home. My first dog, I had been frightened of her at first. I soon came to love her. Patchy was afraid of thunderstorms and I would read aloud to her from my American Girl Doll books to calm her. When she was suddenly gone, I was heartbroken, but for some reason I felt like I couldn't show it. Even though we weren't speaking much, Mary somehow felt my sadness, and she sent me a card with a picture of a dog bouncing up and down beside its owner just like my Patchy had. Mary's kindness has remained unmatched even into my adult life. As she grew sicker and then stronger and then sicker, I wondered why God brought us so close again, had renewed and deepened our friendship and then cruelly ripped it away.

The reality of Mary's cancer slowly formed the center of our teenage lives. It didn't end up being as simple as operating and removing the tumor. By my sixteenth birthday her hair loss was bad enough that it was time for her to shave her head. That Saturday the 24th of February she was headed to the salon, Catherine was headed to mock trial, the guys had something for cross country and all my other friends had various other activities that took precedent over my birthday. I had accepted my sweet sixteen would be quiet. Ethan and Ashley were taking me somewhere but wouldn't tell me where and then that night I would see my friends.

Blindfolded Ethan and Ashley led me laughing and crying out over uneven sidewalks until finally unwrapping my eyes as we rode up the clear escalator of Atlanta's Westin Hotel. At the top I was treated to a beautiful lunch with an edible flower for dessert, almost too beautiful to eat.

When we arrived back to my house I was beaming. Even though the celebration was small, I'd had a great time with my two best friends eating and talking as we rotated over the Atlanta skyline. Inside we headed for my room and I could see the ragged edges of colorful streamers peeking from underneath my door. "Oh mom," I thought and opened the door.

"Surprise" shouted my friends as they leapt towards me.

I stood stunned with surprise. They'd all had good reasons as to why they couldn't spend time with me during the day. But here they were holding balloons and hugging me. Half the house had been decorated during lunch. The TV room was full of balloons, streamers, and a birthday cake sat on the table. Mary arrived a little later in her basketball cap, her head freshly shaved. She put on a brave and smiling face as if she weren't a teenage girl who'd just lost all her hair. Always struggling for approval from others, I felt so loved by my friends that day. And in the pictures, we all look so happy.

By Catherine's birthday in April that happiness had long since faded. Whether it was general teenage moodiness or emotions over my parents split and Mary's sickness or my growing insecurity with myself, I had become increasingly unhappy on the inside. Always under a fairly watchful maternal eye, I couldn't turn to alcohol as frequently as I would have liked, so my tendency toward self-destruction found a new form, an eating disorder. I would soon discover how well excessive drinking and bulimia went together, like liquor before beer or rum shots and coke. First came the bottle then came the toilet. If I'd had enough to drink I wouldn't even need my finger to coax my meals back up my throat. It was after Catherine's birthday dinner that I forced myself to throw up for the first time.

A girl's only dinner was arranged at a French restaurant for the occasion. Beforehand I carefully did my make-up and made sure that my naturally very-curly hair was drying just so. I

slithered into a one-shoulder black cocktail dress from Arden B. that my mom and I had picked out for the occasion. No matter how strict I felt she could be, or how she just didn't get me, she was always kind and fun when it came to shopping. Once when I'd been somewhat unfairly kicked out of class in eighth grade, she found me in the front office crying. She promptly checked me out of school, took me to lunch and bought me an outfit at the GAP and told me how much she loved me, which she did and still does every day, but I needed it even more than ever that afternoon munching chick-fil-a in the food court. Even if I had been wrong in some aspects, no one got away with treating her daughter that way. I switched English teachers and received a letter of apology from the teacher.

Just the way no one knows why certain people become alcoholics, experts still don't agree why certain people develop eating disorders. For years people believed that images of super-skinny actresses and waifish models made young girls, and increasingly boys, push food around on their plates refusing to eat or sneaking to the bathroom in the middle of the night to purge. In 2007, Aimee Liu, a recovered anorexic, published the book *Gaining* with a new take on eating disorders. Liu examines her own eating disorder and interviews others who struggled (or still do) with anorexia and bulimia, as well as discussing the current science of eating disorders. What she finds is, while pictures of Mary-Kate Olsen's dangerously thin body are helpful to no one, most if not all of eating disorder patients share certain personality traits. This is not unlike what you would see in alcoholic's anonymous meeting. People who look very different on the outside are shockingly similar in their thoughts and feelings. Boston psychologists published a study that designated three groupings for these personalities. When I read Liu's description of the perfectionist group I shuddered, because I felt as if she had pulled out the secrets stored in my soul.

The second, or perfectionistic, group includes most bulimics and a minority of restricting anorexics. These are the conscientious “good girls” who aim to please, excel, and conform. They worry about the details but are so often fearful of making a mistake that they can’t get their work in on time. They read an arched brow as contempt, a frown as a stiletto through the heart. They are intensely self-critical.

Being a perfectionist is also a characteristic often found among alcoholics. However what we don’t realize is that “perfection” doesn’t exist. When I inevitably failed at something, by making a 98 instead of 100, by not losing five pounds in one week, by not looking just right, by getting dumped, by not knowing an answer, by needing to ask for help, I sought solace in the one thing I could do perfectly, drink until I blacked out. At which point I would morph into the third “undercontrolled” group as Liu designates it. With the undercontrolled group “emotions are intense, their behaviors are impulsive, they tend to fly into rages...” Switching groups is common, Liu writes, “particularly during recovery” and coincidentally enough “particularly between the perfectionists and the undercontrolled group.” When I recovered from bulimia just before leaving for college my drinking was the raft that carried me from the sober perfectionist to drunken undercontrollee. When I drank I could be free of all my self-imposed rules and restrictions. But moderation doesn’t exist in the alcoholic’s vocabulary, and I sailed right on by it to a state of uncontrollable drunkenness.

I don’t remember why or if there was even a reason, I decided to sneak in Catherine’s downstairs bathroom and puke up my salad. I just didn’t feel right and throwing up made me feel better. I would later find out I wasn’t even being bulimic the right way. Bulimics are supposed to binge first. I was throwing up normal meals. I would never truly binge on fast food or ice cream cake. I saved my gluttony for alcohol.

In my group of friends I was one of few with a strict, to the minute, non-negotiable curfew. My mother in her blind maternal love for my brother and I upheld strict rules in order to protect us from the world and as teenagers to protect us from ourselves. Whenever I went anywhere that involved teen driving I was expected to call when I got there. If I slept over at a friend's I called to say goodnight. I was not allowed to sleep over at someone's without parents home or hang out at someone's house whose parents were out of town. At the time I thought my mother was extremely overprotective, nosy and sometimes plain mean. There were nights I genuinely believed that she didn't want me to have any fun or be a normal kid and that she wanted to control everything about my life. Later I would wish I had let her protect me instead of thwarting her efforts with sneaking around and lies. But for the most part my mother was good at her job and I didn't drink a lot while in high school. She was no fool.

One weekend when Ashley's parents went out of town and Ashley stayed with us my mother saw straight through our claim that we were hanging out at Katie's that Saturday. Conveniently enough Katie lived around the corner or Ashley and she suspected before we were even out the door that there would be a party at Ashley's that night. Of course she was right. When she couldn't get me on the phone she drove to Ashley's and busted up the party. As I blushed purple my friends hysterically recounted to me how they hid in the backyard as my mother bellowed that she knew we were there and I needed to come home immediately. But I wasn't there. Not having fun I had left earlier and was eating waffle house with Mary, Christina and her boyfriend. I'm not sure if she still believes I was hiding somewhere in the bushes waiting for her to leave. Needless to say it was difficult for me to maneuver around her and my clandestine encounters with alcohol had weeks and often months between them.

Getting invited to prom as a sophomore was like Christmas come early. Without an upperclassman boyfriend though, I certainly wasn't going. Jim, a junior I'd briefly dated in the fall, who was still single was my one distant hope. But the Monday before prom came and by then it was common knowledge he was taking one of his platonic girlfriends.

Giving up on getting invited I discussed the details of dresses and dates and after parties with junior girlfriends and my friends lucky enough to be invited, which felt like *everyone* but me. But then the Wednesday before prom, a miracle to a sophomore girl, happened. My friend Thomas an openly gay junior that I'd gotten close with while working on the school newspaper, asked me to be his date. I was elated. That day, my mom, Ashley, our friend Liz Taylor, who hated when people pointed out she had a famous name, and I piled into my mom's red mini-van and hit Lennox and Phipps mall in search of the perfect dress. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Despite my desire to conform and be just like my girlfriends, an impossible task in itself when you are a curvy, tanned, dark-haired Brazilian in a group of mostly slim, many freckled, blondes and brunettes, the one time each year I wanted to stand apart from my friends was prom. I shunned the idea of the strapless dress everyone was wearing or one in black or with heaven forbid, sequins. In high school clothes were where I still felt comfortable being an individual and being myself. After countless dresses, hours of walking, tears in the food court, we found it. It was a light pink silk, with the thinnest of straps. The back was low and the neck high with a small flower on one of the straps. A small weight sewn in the front pulled the neck into a soft v-shape. In short, it was perfect. I could tell by the looks on the faces of my friends and mother. I wasn't allowed to tell my father how much it was and somehow that made it even better, like a secret.

Prom itself was like any high school dance, but with tuxes and floor length gowns. I posed for pictures with my friends and the prom queen, my friend from drill team. After prom I don't remember what Thomas did, if he went out to another party or home for the night. What mattered more to me was that my presence at prom allowed me to go to the after party that my upperclassmen friends were having at Robbie's house. Since it was a part of going to the prom my mom had to let me go, even if our group was spending the night at Jim's house.

The party wasn't small but it wasn't big either. The junior girls there that were friends I'd bonded with on drill team and from working on the school newsmagazine. Being an older sister and not having one, I looked up to them the way I imagine I would an older sister, especially Ally, Kylie and Lara. I thought they were so pretty, so sure of themselves, so confident with the boys that I felt nervous if they looked at me, in short, so *cool*. I wanted to be like them. I relished being able to mention to my friends in my own grade that I had slept over at Kylie's or hung out with Ally or talked about a crush with Lara. Once when one their fiends got sick and couldn't go to the Britney Spears concert, I was invited in her place. Getting buzzed beforehand and singing along with them to "I'm a Slave for You," I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

Falling under the lull of beer, I lay diagonally upside down across Robbie's couch. Most people were drinking in the kitchen. I'd changed out of my dress and into a tank top and orange gym pants. I almost never got to wear tank tops, because my 36DD made them too revealing for a sixteen year-old. My up-do had stayed intact and I had Band-Aids on my nipples. My mother made me put them on because I couldn't wear a bra with the low back of the dress. Without looking around, I dipped into my shirt and peeled them off, then stuck them onto Robbie's coffee table. One under a coaster, one underneath. Later I will wonder what his parents thought when they found them or if they found them at all.

Jim was at the party too. His date had gone home. The times we had gone out in the fall weren't filled with fireworks or butterflies or even an increased heart rate, but I had still craved his attention. When he went to homecoming with another girl after we had gone out to dinner and then began dating one of my younger brother's friends, my apathy changed. How could he prefer plain, geeky, Jenna? His rejection incensed me. And that feeling would become infatuation. It was the start of a pattern I would keep up through college. If a guy was polite, called when he said he would and liked me from the start, I was disinterested. But if he was closed-off or treated me badly, I was hooked. But the most detrimental part of the pattern was when I did meet those one or two people that I had a spark with or felt butterflies flapping in my stomach I would act normal, be myself, and then I would get drunk and ruin the relationship, I use the word loosely, before it took off. Afterwards each rejection would cut away at my self esteem a little bit more and further prove to myself that I was unlovable. But alcohol, that was the one who would heal my fragmented heart, hoisting fragmented self-esteem from the in between the cracks of the sidewalks and briefly allow me to be outgoing, to flirt. That night I flirted with Jim by imitating how Kate Hudson acted towards Billy Crudup in *Almost Famous*, by ignoring him. I believed my indifference peeked his interest, (it was really how much he'd had to drink), and we started fooling around in Robbie's bathroom. After a few minutes we realized it was time for all of us to head over to his house for the night, and blushing, we exited the bathroom.

We piled about fifteen people into someone's parents' mini-van to get to Jim's. It wasn't far but you can imagine the field day the police would have had with us if we'd been caught. Of course this was not what was on our minds. We laughed, some buzzed, more drunk and careless. Sure we hoped we wouldn't see flashing blue lights appear behind us, but the danger wasn't

imminent. I laid across the laps of Ally, who was sitting on someone else, and her boyfriend Andy.

At Jim's it was understood I would sleep in his room. Once in bed we started to kiss, too drunk to notice or care that Will and his date Abbey were across the room on the floor. Suddenly he pulled away and made a horrible sound and seconds later something wet and reeking hit me on the head. Jim had projectile vomited and some of it landed in my hair. I ran out of the room barely missing Abbey and Will.

I burst into the bathroom where Kyle and Cindy were caring for AJ, who was crouched over the toilet.

"Jim threw up on me," I wailed. "There is vomit on me, in my hair!"

Cindy turned the shower on. I stripped down and stepped into the shower, while Cindy barked to the boys not to look. Someone, probably Cindy, got me towels. I fell asleep by Lara on the hard living room floor feeling I'm not sure what, something, but it couldn't penetrate the numbness of alcohol. The next day I was told that Jim getting sick was somehow explained to his mother as my fault. From then on out whenever I crossed her path she shot me dirty looks. As Sunday rolled on I would anxiously await Jim's call, to apologize, to tell me he told his mom I wasn't a bad influence on anyone, that despite throwing up on me, maybe I'd like to go out again. Instead he called and said that while he found me attractive that he was drunk, and that he was sorry he didn't tell me it earlier but he had a girlfriend. It was his date to prom and they had been keeping it quiet. I'm sure I said something perfect like "Oh." And of course even though I had no idea they were dating, his girlfriend Ryann will not wholly believe this and hate me. We will later play nice for a little while and become "friends." However I would inwardly continue

to harbor anger over the fact I was unfairly disliked before and drunkenly fool around with another one of her boyfriend's (knowingly) at the next prom.

Despite the disastrous outcome of prom, I was elated when one of my older friends, Anna Kate, decided to have a party on the last day of school. While Ashley and our friend Glen got ready in Ashley's basement room, I snapped pictures in between refreshing my lip gloss and checking my hair, again. I was really into what I'd deemed "real life" photography or posed pictures of my friends trying to look like they weren't posed, which I consider practice for my career as a National Geographic photographer and writer. I concentrated carefully as I snapped a last picture of Glen. She had one of those pre-curved ribbons that come on birthday presents in her ponytail, the ones you buy at CVS that come in a perfectly curled bunch of coordinating colors. Hers was a mass of pastels. Very girly for her. Glen's style tended to project the tomboyishness of her name and personality.

Ashley and I were dressed in matching halter tops but she in a shade of blue and I in one of pink that looked as if they seeped right off of Glen's hair ribbon onto the fabric of our shirts. My mother hated it when we dressed alike and even more so when we call ourselves twins. Apart from our large chest size, we didn't look anything alike. My hair was dark and recklessly curly. This was before I would become a slave to my hair straightener. Ashley's hair was wavy and a mousy brown which she bleached blonder. My skin was as tan as hers was pale. Everyone we knew would tell me I was beautiful, though I would never fully believe them, in part because I didn't look like anyone else. Ashley was plain at best and her face could quite frankly be unfriendly looking. It would be two more years until I learned just how unfriendly her heart was.

But for the moment I would stick up for her, say she was cute and had a great personality whenever either came under question.

At Anna Kate's I started drinking as much as I could. People will think it was because I hadn't learned how to drink yet, that I was still finding my way around alcohol. They will say this for years whenever I black out, throw up, slur, or embarrass myself. In truth I already knew alcohol and it knew me. I loved the sensation of being carefree that a buzz brought on. In college a close friend will say it's not that when she's drunk she doesn't know a decision is bad, it's that she just doesn't care anymore. For someone so critical of themselves to let go of caring is an unimaginably alluring freedom.

At Anna Kate's, drama of the high school variety stirred up fairly quickly. Christina was there with Mike, who was not her boyfriend at the time, and Jim was there. Somehow at the end of the night he gives us a ride back to my house with minutes to spare. My mother was of course waiting up and I practically fell out of Jim's car trying to get inside by curfew. I said goodnight to my mother and breathed a sigh of relief to my friends when she didn't say anything about drinking. The next morning it was summer and sophomore year was over.

Chapter 3: “Hello, Mr. Heartache. I’ve Been Expecting You.”

When the police officer walks up, I wonder “how did they get here so fast?” He answers my inner dialogue. “Everybody okay? I saw the whole thing,” the officer says. I say yes and protest at his offer to call an ambulance, or my parents. The other driver, the one I hit also says he is fine. “I was sitting in that parking lot.” I hear myself start to lie, saying that I was going to visit my boyfriend in Athens (which I did not have) and was pulling over to stop. I thought I had enough time to make it. Really I never saw the other car. I break down into forced tears again, but still insist I don’t need an ambulance. The officer says “I’m only going to ask this question one time.” I gulp. He looks at both of us before saying, “Has anyone,” he looks from me to the other driver. “Has anyone here been drinking tonight?” “No sir,” we both answer without hesitation. The officer steps away to call a tow truck. A young man, a witness gives me a hug as I stand on the side of the road. I whisper “I have to tell you something. I lied. I have been drinking.” He shushes me and says, “It’s okay. Just don’t say anything about it.” I ask, “You won’t tell?” He nods. “It’s best to just keep quiet. Let’s keep that between me and you.”

Junior year was supposed to be special for reasons only high schoolers cherish. At Decatur High it was when you were allowed to park in the student parking lot and go to prom without having to be invited by an older guy. Red was the class color, the best one. And with two grades below you, you were officially an upperclassman. It was also the year that marked the beginning of the college search. We began to look towards our lives after Decatur High, and while many Saturday mornings began with the usual of waking up at a friend’s after a sleepover or sneaking into the 18 and up locker room at the YMCA, occasionally they included activities like taking the SAT’s and looking at schools online.

While these things were central in my life, the reality of Mary's sickness was the nucleus of many of our activities. Many weekend nights were spent keeping her company in the hospital. When there were more of us than chairs we crowded around her on the floor. It was a typical teenage Friday night transported into the hospital ward. We talked and half-watched TV. When there were only a few of us we pulled around her tighter, sitting on her bed. Her parents marveled at the parade of teenagers kicking it with Mary at the hospital. People thought she was lucky to have such a caring group of friends. What they didn't realize is that we were the lucky ones, fortunate enough to have the privilege of her friendship.

But even my love for Mary couldn't completely overcome the lull of the bottle. One night Jeff and I spent a quiet evening with Mary at her house playing Sorry and goofing off. It's one of my favorite memories of the high school, us laughing and me feeling so content playing a kid's game when I was always trying to grow up too fast.

After Mary tired, Jeff and I slid through the McDonald's drive through for a late dinner of greasy French fries. I wanted to go to a party that was happening at some upperclassmen's house. It was dark and pretty dead inside but Will got me some beer so I figured it was worth staying there for a little while at least. Next thing I know I'm puking McDonald's up over the railing of the deck while a couple of the other kids watch from the backyard swing set. I was embarrassed and pissed, not exactly at the fact I'd puked, but that I had before I got as drunk as I wanted too.

Each Thanksgiving and Christmas my family always does the same thing, and I love it that way. My mother is one of five and my aunts and uncles along with their spouses and children all gather at my Papa's house in North Carolina. For a few days we eat, play by the lake, let the herd of dogs run free, watch football, and fill the house with sounds of a loving family.

While I adored anytime spent at my grandfather's house I especially loved Christmas. It has always been my favorite time of year. Theorizing on exactly why I get so excited about Christmas (though I am now well into my twenties) my mom holds up two explanations which are not mutually exclusive. The first is most likely the correct one, and is that because my parents always made Christmas so important for us and celebrating it so special that I have carried that feeling of excitement into adulthood. Even though my parents were sure to let my brother and me know everyday of our lives that we were very loved, at Christmas the whole world was lit up with love and joy and most importantly Christmas lights. My mother's secondary explanation is biological. The city I was born in, Natal is known as the Christmas City. In Portuguese, Natal means Christmas. Wanting to honor my birthplace they considered it momentarily for a middle name but didn't like the sound and went with Noelle.

The Noelle of that year was like any other. David and I watched 24 hours of *A Christmas Story*, again, constructed gingerbread houses and challenged each other to card games we'd made up the rules to as kids. One thing about David is that he has always been a really good gift giver. He is always generous, even now as a struggling actor in New York City, and picks something you will genuinely like. One Christmas when I started dancing after a long hiatus, he gave me an entire wardrobe from Danskin. Another year he worked at a Christmas tree lot and spent almost all of his earnings on a one hundred dollar gift certificate to Sephora for me and a hundred dollar gift certificate to Crate and Barrel for my mom. I remember feeling stunned by the selflessness of my teenage brother.

That year David was playing Santa when he handed me two heavy boxes with a tag from him. "Ohhhh, what are they?" I asked. My mom shrugged. He'd picked them out on his own. I

pulled off the Christmas paper to find a black and white box of videos titled “Sex and the City, the complete first season” in hot pink. The other package contained the second season.

“Thank you David” I cried as I went to hug my brother. I’d seen the show before but we didn’t have cable at home so only at my friends’ homes. The first time I’d watched was New Years Eve of sophomore year at Catherine’s. She, Grace, Cassie and I had stayed at her place and watched TV and ate delicious snacks while our friends went on Marta to watch the peach drop. Our parents said there was no way we were going to Underground Atlanta on New Year’s Eve with a group of 15 year olds. I’d liked the show, but was about to be completely hooked.

In high school I convinced my parents to let me have a TV in my room. I usually only had it on when my friends were there, but soon the TV was on constantly playing episode after episode of *Sex and the City*. In no time I knew every word, memorized every episode and owned every season as it came out on video cassette. I had never been to New York City. I wasn’t thirty and had never had sex but somehow I felt like I knew these characters. The imperfection of their lives felt genuine. I related to the messiness of Carrie’s romantic life, her individual sense of style and yearned to be old enough to go out drinking with my girlfriends too.

The show became something of a phenomenon. Even though the series ended while I was in college, the show is still very much alive. A special *Sex and the City* Tour Bus runs through Manhattan complete with drinks. The second movie based on the show is currently in the works and the series can now be seen by even those without cable thanks to reruns on network television. But why as teenager did a show with so many foreign experiences in it speak to me and my friends?

Meghan Moran did a study “The role of Parasocial Reference Groups in the Formation of Descriptive Norms about Alcohol Consumption” looking at another show teens went manic for, *The O.C.* Like *Sex and the City*, glamorous people drinking was a regular theme. Moran was interested in why certain approaches to discourage young people from binge drinking produced mixed results and often failed. She found “many students in these cases saw a disjuncture between the statistics reported in the campaign and the drinking behavior they saw when going out, and simply did not feel that the information in the campaign pertained to them or to their relevant social circle.”

But what makes up a young person’s relevant social circle? Moran decided to treat the characters on *The O.C.* as a part of the relevant social circle, referring to them as a possible parasocial reference group for young people. The reference group “a salient group of others that an individual may look to when forming norms,” can include television. Noting that “media effects are rarely, if ever, simple and direct,” Moran wrote “when individuals identify with characters on television programs, they are more likely to parasocially interact with them, or in other words treat them in ways similar to ways they would treat friends and acquaintances.” In other words, identification with a group, real or fictional, is a factor in conforming to that group. Researchers have found “that the level of identification with a group and adherence to that group’s social norms were positively correlated.” Moran’s study of *The O.C.* which depicts young people using and abusing alcohol, especially the main character, found students who watched the show perceived that high school students drank the way the characters on the show did: “identification with the program and identification with a main character who consumed a significant amount of alcohol were also significantly correlated with the perception of the amount of alcohol high school students consume.” When I read this something clicked. In high

school and college the people who told me not to drink, even the ones my age, weren't people I identified with. The characters on *Sex and the City* and my own friends that I identified with did drink, a lot. The posters in the freshman dorms warning against binge drinking didn't register with me. Even though they depicted other college students, I knew or thought I knew that the minds behind those posters weren't normal college kids like me. They were stodgy, middle-aged health center staff and had nothing to do with me.

Even when your friend has cancer, life rolls on.

I was proud of my article about Mary. During my second year on the high school newspaper the staff adviser had started giving me more freedom. I was getting to write about more than sports. There was something satisfactory yet scary about writing a profile of someone I knew and loved. I also agonized over it being perfect. I had been picked to write Mary's story detailing her successful battle with cancer because I was one of her best friends, but I felt that since I was so close to the story it had to be my best.

As it got close to time to send the issue to press, I was over at Mary's house taking pictures for the spread. I suggested we take a few shots outside. She nodded but didn't want to stay out long. Mary wasn't feeling well that day. She hadn't been at school in a couple days. I quickly snapped some pictures while she stood in her front yard. She looked beautiful, full of light, even without hair, but her smile was playful. She tired quickly. We went back inside and ate wheat thins and the better part of a block of cheddar cheese. Our conversation was quiet. Suddenly Mary said she wasn't hungry anymore, that she needed to go lie down.

I followed her into her room and Mary climbed into her loft. I went after a few more crackers in the kitchen and then put away our snack. I went back to say goodbye, but Mary was already asleep. I went home quietly. I knew something was wrong.

But the article went to press anyway. Mary was going to beat cancer.

Somehow it was the week of my seventeenth birthday. I knew nothing would top last year's surprise but I was still excited. Leigh-Ann and I were sitting in first period, math class, talking quietly during group work. I didn't pay much attention when someone knocked softly on the door and Ms. Morris went to speak with someone in the hallway. But then Ms. Morris asked Leigh-Ann and me to step out into the hall. One of the counselors was standing there. My first thought is that we were in trouble for something. But the junior prank we'd pulled was months ago. Then I saw a few more of our friends and I knew it was something bad, something about Mary.

Chapter 4: Getting into Trouble

-Seven months later-

I was toasted. I was aware that I was at the old ruins but I didn't remember us getting there. I didn't even know who us was. The ruins which have since transformed like the rest of the world, into identical, too close together, what ever happened to the concept of yards, condominiums. I doubt any of the owners who sit on their porch today looking right into their neighbor's window know that where they now lay their heads each night was once dirt and trees where high school kids gathered to party on weekend nights.

I know I was there at the ruins that night. I know I was the drunkest I had ever been at that point in my life. I know that I left. That somehow I had the idea to drive to Athens, where I'd never been, to see Jim, who I rarely spoke to anymore except for a few late night conversations. I also know what Ed told me that I have never told to anyone that when I left I said that I was going to wreck my car into a tree. Alcoholism is a disease that wants to kill you. I had no idea that mine would try to kill me so quickly.

I thought I was lost. I felt like I'd been driving forever. In reality I wasn't lost at all I was going the right way and making good time, but to my drunken brain I knew it was taking too long to get to Athens. I remember violently whipping my car left to turn off highway 78 onto Rosebud Road. To this day every time I pass that intersection I get a chill and Goosebumps trickle down my arms. Even when I don't realize I'm about to pass that road the tiny hairs on forearms spring up without fail. Is it psychological? Probably. But maybe it's physical too. Maybe it's difficult for the body as well as the mind to forget what it feels like to have death make a wild grab for it.

I was going to stop and ask directions. I never saw the other car coming. And then it happened.

The impact hits suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere. I'm spinning wildly, like I've been hit by a charging rhinoceros. This is it, I think. I'm dying. This is what it's like to die. My life isn't flashing before me like people say it does in the movies. Instead my mind clutches fiercely to one thought, as if I hold it in my mind, I'll stay awake, stay alive. I'm not thinking about my parents or my brother or my friends. Their faces, they somehow elude me. Instead I think, "I haven't finished my spread for the yearbook yet. Who will finish it for me?" I don't think this is what you're supposed to be thinking about when you're about to die, unfinished homework. Then my seat collapses and my body bends forward with it. I shut my eyes tight. And wait.

Someone is yelling. Hands are on my arms, pulling me. Pulling me out of my car. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" My eyes focus on an Indian man in front of me. "I, I think I'm okay," I stutter. "Why did you do that? We thought you'd be dead." I'm not saying much just staring. My car is in the middle of the road. There is glass everywhere. There's a truck, big and silver also in the middle of the road, with its front fender crunched up. There are more men. A man with grey hair comes up. "Are you okay. Why, why did you do that?" He is kind to me despite what just happened. He has daughters that make mistakes too. Then there's a police officer. He's young. "Do we need to call an ambulance?" "I'm fine I say. Really I'm fine." The Indian man again, I just knew you'd be dead. I start to apologize and fake cry as it dawns on me what has happened. I have hit the tall man with grey hair in his truck. I didn't even see him because I was so drunk. Another man from the group of men speaks and puts his arm around me. "It's ok hone. It's ok." But I know that it's not.

When the police officer walks up, I wonder “how did they get here so fast?” He answers my inner dialogue. “Everybody okay? I saw the whole thing,” the officer says. I say yes and protest at his offer to call an ambulance, or my parents. The other driver, the one I hit also says he is fine. “I was sitting in that parking lot.” I hear myself start to lie, saying that I was going to visit my boyfriend in Athens (which I do not) and was pulling over to stop. I thought I had enough time to make it. Really I never saw the other car. I break down into forced tears again, but still insist I don’t need an ambulance. The officer says “I’m only going to ask this question one time.” I gulp. He looks at both of us before saying, “Has anyone,” he looks from me to the other driver. “Has anyone here been drinking tonight?” “No sir,” we both answer without hesitation. The officer steps away to call a tow truck. A young man, a witness gives me a hug as I stand on the side of the road. I whisper “I have to tell you something. I Lied. I have been drinking.” He shushes me and says, “It’s okay. Just don’t say anything about it.” I ask, “You won’t tell?” He nods. “It’s best to just keep quiet. Let’s keep that between me and you.”

I sat for what felt like years on the sidewalk of the gas station. The young officer leaned out the window of his car still offering help. Finally Emily and Christina pulled up. On the drive home I realize how far out we really were. Back at Christina’s she prepared me for bed. I wavered between numb and upset. Gavin came to see how I was and when we were alone does the only thing in the world that could have made me feel better at that moment: he takes out his fake teeth and shows me the gaps from where his front teeth were knocked out in a car accident earlier that year. This is something he has never done before or since, sensitive about his looks as he was. He didn’t say it, but I finally felt that I wasn’t alone.

Tucked into the sheets, I asked to see Casey, a boy I’d kissed at Music Midtown once who’s my brother’s age. I wasn’t as sobered up by the accident as I thought I was. He, of course,

didn't come and continued the party which has moved to Christina's. In the morning I woke up with a bowling ball in my stomach that only seemed to get heavier as I got a ride home to tell my parents what happened.

My parents understood as best they could. As I told them what happened with the whole family sitting in the living room, I bawled. I told my brother to never, never ever drive...recklessly. I choked on the word drunk because I didn't have the courage to tell them that's what really happened. I'd said I just thought I had enough time to make the turn and the road had still been wet, because of an earlier storm. They'd trusted me and even if they had suspected alcohol was involved I'd only received a traffic ticket, not a DUI.

I went with my dad to pull my belongings out of what was left of my first car. It looked like a ball of crumpled aluminum. My father just looked at it, speechless. Later that afternoon my mother was unusually quiet at the doctor's office. Since I'd refused the hospital that night, my parents wanted to make sure I didn't have any internal injuries. Aside from a few bruises, I was fine.

I'd been taking care of two dogs and a guinea pig for a Decatur family that week, and the night of the accident I didn't make it over to the house to let the dogs out for their last time, usually between 10:30 and 11. The next morning I rushed over there, even though the family had already come back and my mother told them I'd been in a car accident. I flew in their door felling terrible and apologizing. Mrs. Sherman assured me it was okay and to not apologize. I had been in a bad car accident. It wasn't my fault. It was one time. The dogs were fine. I wanted to blurt out that it was my fault. I'd made those silly sweet fluffy dogs uncomfortable all night because I was out getting shitfaced and slamming my car into someone else's. But I didn't say anything.

I tried to take it easy for awhile. But then I found myself on senior spring break without any inhibitions and little supervision. By the second night I was blacking out and found myself in big trouble.

Megan wouldn't talk to me in the car.

"I'm sorry," I wailed pathetically. She didn't say anything back, just looked at me in the rearview mirror, pissed.

Finally, "Why did you do that? Emilia, everyone was really worried."

"I'm sorry. I don't know. I didn't mean to run away from everyone. I was fine. I was on the beach with Blair and Drew and the guys." I lay across the back seat.

Megan didn't say anything else. When we got back to the beach house, Glen's mom took me into her room and put me to bed. I wasn't allowed to talk to the other girls.

I woke up in a white room with a white comforter in a twin bed. I remembered I was in Glen's mom's room, that I'd had a kind of bad night the night before. Glen's mom, Dana, came in and looked down at me with her short-haired face. At that moment I still thought I could get out of any trouble I was in. I thought maybe she'd be cool since I'd made it back unharmed.

"You're mom is on the way, Honey."

Fuck. I got that sick feeling of dread in my stomach. I was going to be in so much trouble.

Now, six years later, I still don't really know what happened that night. The night I scared the crap out of my friends and probably everyone I came in contact with. I remember standing in the upstairs bathroom taking shot after shot. A flash of vomiting in the toilet. Another flash of sitting at someone else's beach house with Megan. Getting upset about something.

Grabbing a kitchen knife. Gliding it across my wrist, just barely. I had the faintest of faint scratches. That's all I could do. Evan or was it Nate, telling me to just give him the knife. Being on the beach. Boys wearing Mardi Gras beads. Truth or dare? A kiss with Blair. Maybe it was spin the bottle. Drew throwing up red on the sand in front of a police officer. Me pleading with him not to take Drew. Saying I was his girlfriend and I'd take him home straightaway. He said he'd arrest me too. I scampered off. Megan picking me up.

My mom had driven through the night. When she arrives, I walked out of Glen's mom's room still drunk. My body hasn't had the time to make it to a hangover. I felt confused, upset, anxious and scared. The house was quiet, abnormally so, as if everyone was pretending to be sleeping but listening to every word from a hiding spot upstairs. I didn't see anyone, and then Christina came down the stairs with an armful of my stuff. She didn't look at me. She practically threw my stuff into my open duffel bag. My *Sex and the City* tapes rested on the top of my unfolded clothes hurriedly stuffed inside.

Later I will find out more pieces of what happened that night. I drank so much they thought they would have to call the hospital. In my black-out I said terrible things. I said I knew Mary was going to die and that we're all going to die too. I was sickened to hear I would say something so gross, so crazy, so wrong. I still cringe today when I think about it. I also wasn't doing a careful job at covering up my bulimia. Apparently my drunken aim for the toilet was off the mark. Christina had to clean up my vomit. There is nothing she hates more than throw up.

After spring break there was no way I could avoid getting treatment for my eating disorder. Oddly enough my therapist was the first one to say to me that I needed to watch my drinking. It sounded like alcohol was lending itself to some dangerous patterns. I brushed off this comment. I was there about my problem with forcing myself to throw up, not my drinking.

[For the purpose of this thesis, I skip ahead in the chronology of my active alcoholism to my time in college at the University of Georgia.]

Chapter 5: Escape to Athens

My pot luck roommate, Brandie, and I didn't have much chemistry. She was quiet and spoke in a soft self-conscious voice. She listened to the Chicago soundtrack on her computer and dressed as plainly as she looked. She didn't seem to get my need for dozens of shoe boxes holding colorful sandals and completely impractical high heels. She didn't listen to All American Rejects, wasn't addicted to *Sex and the City*, and didn't see the allure in a bottle of rum with a picture of a pirate on it. She also didn't understand me rushing. I didn't understand how she could not want to be in a sorority.

Since I'd been to visit Ally at UGA as a senior in high school I had been in love with the idea of being in a sorority. There was just *something* in those Greek lettered t-shirts and old houses lining Milledge Avenue. I wasn't sure at the time, but I think it was my wanting to belong, to fit in, to blend in that fueled my desire to rush. My mother had been in a sorority but didn't talk about it much. Being in a sorority hadn't defined her college life like I believed it would mine.

In Greek folklore UGA is known for having one of the most intense, most selective, and most brutal of sorority rushes. The year I rushed I was told we were considered the second worst in the country, trailing Ole Miss. Roughly 1,200 hopeful girls lined the streets of Milledge Avenue in the August sun at a chance to call a house of strangers "sister" and to be handed their college identity to them in a bid day basket. I was one of them.

This is not a story about race relations; it is a story that has no color, as alcoholism claims all types, sizes, and ages. But unfortunately in a conservative Southern town, a young Brazilian woman rushing during Pan-Hellenic, read white girl, rush, sticks out and not necessarily in a good way. Years after I went through my first rush, an African American girl went through Pan-Hellenic rush much to everyone's shock. She didn't end up pledging.

People will be angered that I wrote these words. People will claim that it is absolutely not true and hold up the few minorities in even fewer of the sororities including myself as proof that I am wrong and that I am making something an issue that isn't. It will make people uncomfortable. The truth often does when it is not a flattering one. But I was sure as hell made uncomfortable because of my outward appearance many more times than this paragraph will ever make any Greek uncomfortable. Once in the Greek system and before I was made aware more than once that America is certainly not a post-racial society, and UGA's rush system is even further from being one. My mother's sorority cut me for not looking like I would fit in. The call, because you must call legacy's mother/sister if you cut them, devastated and enraged her. I can't say it didn't cost me a few tears, but my sophomore year I found a sorority that didn't feel that way and in my heart I knew it was the right one for me.

Unhappy with my invites for round three I dropped out of rush. I opted for continuous open bidding but was fated to be a part of the 80 percent of non-Greek students my freshman year. When sororities don't fill their pledge classes, girls who have dropped out of rush but stay on the open bidding list can be called with a bid the first morning of school.

As I slept off my emotional beating provided by rush I heard my dorm phone ring early in the morning the day of last minute bidding.

Ring. Who the hell?

Ring. Oh, it's a sorority, with a bid.

Ring. Get up. It could be someone good. It could be my mom's sorority.

Ring. What if it's not? I'll have to decide right away if I want to say yes.

Ring. Fuck it. And fuck them.

Ring.

Silence.

I didn't tell my mother for a long time that I hadn't answered the phone that morning and for awhile I itched to know who had changed their mind. Who had decided I was worth being their sister? I was mad at myself the day after bid day as I watched what seemed like every girl on campus walk to class and fill the dining hall wearing pastel colored t-shirts with Bid Day and some silly graphic on the back and Greek letters printed on the chest. And to my jaded eyes they all looked the same, blonde, skinny, faux-tanned, straight haired, dressed in running shorts and carrying quilted Vera Bradley bags. I had never felt so rejected and for a second I understood why girls through themselves out of dorm windows when they didn't get a bid. Who were you if you weren't a sorority girl?

Unlike many of the people I met at Georgia who came from giant high schools with thousands of students, I didn't come to college with dozens of people I already knew. The hope scholarship had made UGA more appealing to the 4.0 students of the metro Atlanta area. Out of my good friends from high school a good number went out of state. I did know a few people from outside my high school though. Julia, my summer camp best friend that I was inseparable from three weeks out of the year, was there, and Marianne Camp or MC a friend I had made during my senior year stint at metro dance company. MC came with her friends, Jenny, Gwen and Kate and the six of us made fast friends.

If you look at my pictures of freshman year, they will tell you all that you need to know. The album is short and in almost every picture I am drunk. In one I am high from eating white funfetti weed cake, a variation on brownies that tasted as bad as it sounds. I am always with at least one of my new friends or my boyfriend, Wes. We had met while I worked at the pool and found that we both absolutely loved getting shitfaced. He went to school in South Carolina and would travel down several weekends a month. The three of us, him, me and a handle of Smirnoff would spend the weekend together, venturing out of my dorm room to eat at Chili's with the six pack, who didn't like him or move our party to Mexicalli. Flavored vodka, fattening food and tangible proof that a boy liked me were all I needed to make it the perfect relationship.

During the first football game, the six of us girls discovered the joy of tailgating. Armed with fake id's and the convenience of the Russell Bus to take us downtown we also discovered the ease of getting obscenely drunk pretty much whenever we wanted to. I was introduced to the game of power hour that we played on Thursday nights before wobbling our way downtown. We played while watching *Friends*, in its final season, taking a shot of beer each minute for an hour. When I received my grades at the end of first semester I was stared stunned and numbed at an A, B, C, D. My parents were going to kill me. Suddenly the Tuesday nights at JR's and dancing on tables at Bourbon Street didn't make me feel giddy. They made me feel sick to my stomach. What had I done?

Back then the Hope Scholarship was evaluated each year instead of each semester. Spring semester I put away my shot glasses, saw the boyfriend less and stayed in on weeknights and pulled my average up above the 3.0 I needed to keep Hope and my parents from looking too closely at my college lifestyle. There was no way they would buy college is just really hard for more than one semester.

I moved home for the summer back under my mother's watchful eye and to the harsh reality of the bathroom scale. I had reached my highest weight thanks to the dining halls and 50 cent beer specials. I was disgusted and cut down on the drinking. My mom and I joined weight watchers and my summer obsession became running at the gym at 7 in the morning before my shift as a lifeguard at the neighborhood pool began. By the end of the summer I'd lost around 15 pounds and was ready to head back to Athens.

Chapter 6: Back in Trouble

My sophomore year of college was a roller coaster, existing of high crests followed by gut-wrenching drops. I'd decided to brave sorority rush again. I felt confident in my new slimmer body and after four days of August Georgia weather, I suicided (only bid for one sorority). That evening I jumped six feet every time my phone rang. If you don't get any bids, which is more likely if you suicide, your rush counselor calls you to let you know and ask if you want to go on a kind of bid waiting list. I couldn't stand to go on that list again.

No bad news phone call ever came and I got to join the throng of girls wearing bid day shirts that year. Sigma Kappa's was lavender that year and I don't think anyone has ever loved a tee-shirt so much.

Busy with sorority life, fall break crept up on me. This year there would be no road trip for me. As my friends headed to the biggest cocktail party in the south I headed to piedmont hospital for surgery. After years of unwanted attention, wearing two sports bras and lower back pain, as well as no tank tops or string bikinis, I'd decided to have a breast reduction. Dressed in pink flannel pajama pants and my bid day shirt I was ready to go, no looking back, no second thoughts. No one could believe the transformation. I went from a 36DD to a 34B, just like that. Well it was a little more trouble. When they woke me up in recovery I felt terrible, like someone had taken a knife to my breasts, and for days after the surgery I couldn't keep anything down. At first the hospital staff said I needed to let the vomiting pass, but when it got to the point that this former bulimic was crying her eyes out because she couldn't stop vomiting, they finally gave me a prescription to make it stop.

Wes had bought tickets for us to see Dracula the ballet, which was performing at the Fox theatre. It was an amazingly sweet gesture when you haven't just had surgery. We made it about half way through and had to leave. Still on pain medicine it kind of scared me too.

Shortly after recovering from surgery I decided to end things with Wes. Still in a long distance relationship I phoned him up one night and broke it off. My mother said she wasn't surprised. I'd woken up from my surgery and was told he was on the phone I uninhibited by pain killers bluntly said I did not want to talk to him, no reason, no explanation. The fascination had run its course.

On New Year's Eve a couple months later out at my favorite bar with my friends I locked lips with a boy named Jesse and found myself poised to begin dating again. Drunkenly we made out and exchanged numbers and soon we were on our first date. I played it perfectly until a week later I was out with my sorority sister, Gabby. Jesse's younger brother was in town and they had plans. I was headed out for a night of dancing and we made tentative plans to try to meet up later on. Jesse's brother wasn't twenty-one though, neither was I, so it would depend on if he could get in to a bar or not.

Sunday morning I woke up at Gabriella's. We'd become fast friends after pledging bonding over our love of darkish humor and dark rum. I could vaguely recall how we got there, her boyfriend's truck. But everything before that was gone. The last thing I remembered clearly was heading downstairs at Classic City. I looked at the nightstand, picked up my phone. No missed calls. No texts from Jesse. We'd never met up, but I thought I remembered us talking on the phone. I had a sensation like something went wrong. Like maybe I'd drunk dialed him. A lot. My call history showed only the last twenty calls I'd made. Most were to his phone. Crap. I

quickly sent him a text message apologizing for any drunken calls or texts. Explain it was a crazy night. I was sure he'd understand.

Gabby was still asleep but my hangover refused to let me drift back off. It wasn't quite eight yet. I closed my eyes, but couldn't stop moving around. I hated that I could never, ever sleep after I drank. At least I was awake early and could get some homework done I thought. My squirming woke Gabby.

I asked her, "So, what happened last night?"

"Last night was crazy. Do you remember when Josh and I picked you up?"

"What?"

"Oh my gosh," she laughed. "You wandered off downtown and then you called me to get you, so I called Josh. And do you know where you were?"

I shook my head.

"Creswell!"

The freshman dorm? Why the hell was I there?

"You said you walked there with some kids you knew from high school."

Then I remembered, vaguely. I was walking from downtown; where I was going, who knows? I saw TJ from school. He's my brother's age, a freshman in college and lived in Creswell. I walked back with him and his friends because I was alone. They didn't think it was a good idea for me to be alone. Then I must have called Gabby. I had a flash of memory of sitting in Creswell's lobby. I must have felt embarrassed like everyone knew I was too old to be there. Anyone who saw me would have thought I was just another drunken freshman girl. Locked out of her room or something.

I felt my cheeks flame as I told Gabby what I remembered about getting there.

“Do you remember when you fell down the stairs at Classic?” Gabby asked.

I didn’t.

“Okay, this is how I know I love you. I love my bed. Anyone who knows me knows how much I love my bed. And my sheets. I love my sheets. You fell down the stairs at Classic and scraped up your knee.”

I glanced down as she talked and my body suddenly registered the pain. My knee was cut.

“When we got back I tried to tell you to wait so I could clean up your cut, but you just plopped into bed and got blood on my sheets. You just snuggled on in there.”

I apologized. The heat of shame increased.

Gabby assured me it was okay. “It’s just I love my bed. If it were anyone else...”

I glanced at my phone before turning it off. The time read 4:50 pm. Gabby and I were heading to the evening service at the Catholic center.

“Still nothing?” she asked.

I shook my head. During the service I felt like a hypocrite. My hangover was fading but not gone and I probably still smelled like liquor. As soon as we left I opened my phone.

“He called,” I exclaimed.

“He left a message.”

I listened to it in the car. Gabby must have seen the hope slip from my face.

“What’d he say?”

“He wants to talk. I don’t know. He just sounded...kind of mad or something.”

Once I was home by myself I waited a little bit before calling back. It took him 13 hours to call me back. I couldn't look like I'd been checking my phone every two minutes to see if he called, even if that's exactly what I was doing. Our phone call was brief. I didn't say much.

"Do you remember how many times you called me?" Jesse asked. My answers to all his questions will be no, followed by a sheepish I'm sorry.

"Do you know the things you were saying? I had to turn off my phone."

Apparently I'd said things that were crazy, words that weren't very nice when I didn't get my way.

"It's just not going to work out," Jesse said.

When we hung up I felt numb. I couldn't believe it, yet I could. I felt like he was being unfair. I apologized. It was just a wild night. This kid who I'd locked lips with shortly after meeting him on New Year's Eve downtown, this kid with the revolting bathtub, this kid who has done drugs and hooked up with my neighbor, was telling me that he could not get past me having one crazy night?!

I protested to no one, tantrumed to the walls. My roommate, Avery, came in my room after hearing my outburst.

"No! Stop!" Avery cried. "Don't do that."

She wasn't referring to my fit but her eyes were following me as I grabbed my reserve handle of vodka, unscrewed the top and bee-lined for my bathroom sink. Holding the bottle by the neck, I poured the raspberry-flavored clear liquid down the sink with the water running.

"You'll want it later," Avery protested. "Or, I'll drink it."

As the last drops swirled with the water on their way down the drain, she gave up.

I decided for the first time to quit drinking.

Later that week I went out with Gabby again, to prove that I could go out, not drink alcohol and still have a fun night. Inside I was also proving this to Jesse to show him I did not in fact have a problem. If I had a problem I couldn't do this. Bourbon Street was empty. Gabby ordered a drink. I pouted on my barstool. The decently cute bartender, good body, blond, noticed my lack of alcoholic beverage and engaged us in conversation.

“Why aren't you drinking?” he asked.

“I quit.”

“She didn't quit. Don't listen to her,” Gabby countered. “She just had a bit of a bad night, that's all.”

I'm doing penance for my sins, I thought.

Later the bartender set down a beer in front of me and smiled. I stared at it. It looked so harmless in its little clear plastic cup.

“I kind of feel bad not drinking it. Like I'm being rude,” I said to Gabby.

I took it to the bathroom, took a swig and left it on the sink. I held the beer in my mouth for a second before swallowing. My mother says I chew my drinks. I always have. It felt cold and it bit my taste buds the way beer always did. Good, yet not good at the same time. Then I was past hating beer but I wasn't sure I liked it yet. I was getting used to it.

I survived the rest of the quiet and all together dull night without drinking anymore. I tried not to look like it, but I was searching for Jesse every place we go. Secretly hoping we would run in to him and then he would see me completely under control. Outwardly I agonized and analyzed with Jesse. It felt like the worst night I'd ever had. I was miserable and I couldn't even get drunk to dull the feeling. That week I join a facebook group that knew exactly how I felt. They all got it, why couldn't he?



Dammit take my phone when I get drunk!

“We've all been there. One minute you're chugging Jagermeister, the next you're drunk dialing the one person you should've left way the hell alone. You think you're clever now, but the next day will reveal the truth. You'll wake up, grimace at the phone on the floor, and think to yourself "Fuck. Please say I didn't do what I think I did." But you did. You sent the sappiest, most pathetic text messages imaginable. You were an ass. It's mis-spelled. It rambles. And it makes you look like the biggest, most embarrassing waste-of-space on Earth. Damn you, cell phones! And, you know what? Damn you, Facebook. Because right when I stopped sending the other ones, you set me back again. You are the new drunken text message, you bastard.”

-From the *Facebook* Group “Dammit take my phone when I get drunk!”

My next low would come on the fourth of July. It was and humid when I'd finally left work. It had been a terrible day, a 36 dollar day, but at least it hadn't been a zero day. I was afraid my boss didn't like me already. She'd been enthusiastic about hiring me but then after some confusion about working the fashion show I had landed on her bad side within a week of working for her. I called Christina.

"You ready to go?"

"Yeah. I'm so bored. And Gavin's been texting me," Christina said.

"Alright. Well I'll be there soon. I'm so tired. I almost want to stay here." I paused, listened to her silence hoping she would agree but knowing she wouldn't.

"I bet they'll be some cute Emory boys at the square," I said in my last ditch effort to get out of driving to Athens.

"Well I just really want to get out of here," Christina answered.

I knew it wouldn't work. "Yeah, Athens will be fun. See you soon."

At home I gathered my overnight stuff together. My mom looked like she was trying to look relaxed, though I knew she was anxious about us driving, specifically me driving, and us partying. Of course I'd made it out that all we were going to do was cook and barbeque by the pool, swim and just hang out and catch up with my girlfriends. Not like we were going to get tanked and go downtown, which was the truth.

"I love you. Please be careful. I don't like you driving on a holiday with drunks on the road. Call me the minute you get there."

"I will. I'm a good driver."

"It's not you I worry about. Watch out for the other guy."

"Love you Mom."

I picked up Christina in my mom's bright red dodge van. The nice thing about driving the van was cops don't look at a soccer mom van too carefully. We could speed a little. The van had also come in handy for driving and picking people up from downtown, or when you've had a few. But I'd been trying hard not to drive drunk anymore since I'd driven in a black-out earlier in the summer. That had really scared me, having a friend say I'd drive over and me not remembering it. I could have gone back to jail and not even known it. Christina and I discussed my latest romantic flop with a boy named Mark as we drive.

Our first date had been sub-par. We ate crappy food at Applebee's while he talked non-stop about himself. Then we watched *Sex and the City* reruns at my apartment while I sipped beer, trying to look mature for my older date and take the edge off our boring conversation. What we had lacked in sober chemistry we made up for when we were wasted and our relationship had fallen into a pattern of getting sauced and sleeping over. Then Gabby had run into him trying to take home another girl after I'd moved home and our weak bond to each other completely dissolved. Despite being "done with him" I still wanted him to know I was in Athens and still want to see me.

"Okay so you think if I do a mass text of Happy fourth of July or text him and make it look like a mass text that will be good," I asked her.

"Yeah that's a good idea," Christina agreed.

"Okay so like Happy Fourth of July y'all?"

"Yes."

I typed out the text as I drive.

"Okay. I sent it and it totally looks like a mass text, because I sent it to Jamie too."

"That's good."

He never texted back.

“We’re here,” I said as we drove up the hill to my complex. Christina had been to my apartment before, but the announcement was really more for me. It felt like a decade since I’d been to this home where I felt like I could relax, be myself, and do what I wanted. I hadn’t had any parents in the dorm, but I’d had an RA and about 900 other girls. Living in Riverwalk, with just my friends, made me feel independent and grown up.

I looked over at the woods behind the complex as we drove down the hill and past the pool. The summer sky was still light and pink and the trees stretched up to scratch it. Another evening when the sky looked like it did that Fourth of July, my sorority sister, Jessica, and I were walking in the complex when we saw a deer standing against the trees. It stared at us as we stood there silently. Then the sunlight shimmered and the deer vanished back into woods.

I parked the van outside my townhouse. I was excited to see my roommates. “Hey!” I shouted as we bust in the door.

“Emilia!” Jenny screamed and caught me in a big hug. Then she did the same to Christina. The rest of the girls were outside and we slid open the glass door to exchange hugs and greetings.

My heart genuinely warmed at seeing them. I had missed living with my friends. Christina and I headed to my room to pick out outfits. I decided on my new black gaucho pants with a navy tube top that used to be a dress. I couldn’t decide if I should wear my mother’s grandmother’s red beads for my red. I had got blue and a little white covered in the top’s pattern. Christina and I took turns taking shots while we primped and I debated the merits of each piece of jewelry. Eventually we trumped downstairs to the keg in the back and got to drinking. Later I

will see pictures from us drinking out back, but I won't remember taking them. After awhile, Christina left to go over to Gavin's. I didn't like this but I knew I couldn't stop her, so I made her promise to meet us downtown so she would end up back at my apartment for the night.

My roommates and I headed for down town to our favorite bar, Cutter's, where we knew we'd get in. It wasn't crowded. Most people were out of town for the holiday. We talked, drank, and sung aloud to our favorite songs. Then Christina called. She wasn't having fun with Gavin. Not surprised I told her what street Cutter's was on, and said I would step out so she could see where we were.

"Christina!" I waved. That's when it happened.

"Hey you." Cops. Two of them. Shit.

Apparently I turned around and tried to go back in the bar. Undeterred they get off of their bicycles and followed me in.

"You. Come here. You had an open container outside."

I feigned surprise.

"Please step outside."

My friends looked at me in shock and nervousness.

"Are you 21?" one of them asked once we were on the sidewalk.

I had the urge to lie, just for a piece of a second, but decided not to.

"No."

It was the word they were waiting for, salivating for. Suddenly my open container turned into me getting arrested. That was where it got hazy. I know I cursed them and I cried. I went between logical arguments, to cursing them, and then crying and begging not to go to jail. The handcuffs were loose. I slipped them off. I didn't try to go anywhere. They knew who I was. I

just didn't want to wear them. That pissed them off. They put them on tighter, too tight. Later I had bruises all over my wrists. I tried to explain that I just didn't want to wear them, they made me uncomfortable, they were embarrassing. My pleas fell on deaf ears. It's just in my mind, hand cuffs were... for criminals.

The cops searched my purse. Taunted me when they found my fake id.

Kate and the new friend she'd made at the bar stood on the corner watching. Lana screamed at the officer that I was the good, responsible one, to let me go. After a few threatening looks from them and maybe words she had to relent or risk being my cell mate. Honestly I was pissed at my friends a little bit. I didn't want anything bad to happen to them but why me and only me? Not one of us was twenty one. About two years later when two of my sorority sisters get arrested during parent's weekend, I will be a little bit jealous that they went through the experience together.

Athens-Clarke County was fairly quiet that night but I did my best to keep the officers attending to me busy. I would alternate between crying loudly, acting sweet and asking obnoxious questions, and back talking. They took away my high heels and held up hideous orange sandals. I did my best Carrie Bradshaw from the "Karma" episode of *Sex and the City* where her shoes get stolen and her friend brings her horribly ugly replacements. I gasped and said, "I can't wear those."

My tube top kept slipping as well, so I was made to put on a hideous drab dark blue shirt so I would stop asking for someone to help me pull it up, please.

Taking my mug shot turned into a photo shoot. Once again recalling my media role models I struck cheerleading poses and smiles for my picture like the girls in *Sugar and Spice*.

One of the women found it amusing enough but still said I needed to stop doing that. She also let me check the pictures to make sure I looked okay.

The other female officer, who I'd asked earlier if there would be murderers in my cell, had much less patience for me. She made me turn off my cell phone as it rang non-stop from the time we got there. I was too drunk to use the jail phone properly and make my one phone call. I made about seventy phone calls to no one since I never did get a dial tone. While I was still staring at the phone like an undiscovered organism, I was told to get up and then escorted to my cell.

"But, but I haven't made my phone call," I protested.

After being in my cell for a few minutes, I tapped on the glass. "I need to go to the bathroom," I whined.

The guard sighed, unlocked the door and told me where to go. Afterwards I lay on the bench to try to sleep, when I heard a noise at the door. I looked up and saw Jenny. I was shaken. I can't remember if I'd been crying, but Jenny told me later I was curled into a ball, in the fetal position, lying on the bench. My face said it all. A couple hours in the county jail and I was already broken.

Chapter 7: “You Never Say If You’re here to Stay or Only Passing Through.”

I sat at my desk and flipped open my computer. I was frustrated. Okay, pissed. Everyone else was going out that night. Everyone except for me. It was fall of junior year and I was still on probation, and would be until about a week before my twenty-first birthday. Until then I was not only on legal probation, but on social probation. I was stuck inside on weekend nights while my friends went to my favorite bars, downed all my favorite drinks, met cute guys and drunkenly danced. The fact it was football season made it all even worse. The tailgates, the parties, the bars post home game wins. All of this I was missing.

I was living at the sorority house then and on weekend nights it got eerily silent as sisters headed to various social engagements or home or to visit long distance boyfriends. I absentmindedly checked my e-mail. The only taste I’d have of downtown until February was when I shuttled my friends from downtown and the smell of liquored sweat, cigarettes and cheeseburgers wafted into my cars through cracked windows or by clinging to my friends’ hair.

I logged on to *Facebook*. Looked through some of my friends’ picture albums. Most of them are of girls, dressed up for a night out, holding beer bottles or red solo cups. They all looked so happy and carefree. Why was it me who got arrested? It was so unfair.

My friends had seemed way more drunk than I had, and they weren’t 21 either. It wasn’t their fault though. It was those stupid, power-tripping cops. I hadn’t even really had that much to drink. I’d been nursing the same beer for... hours? Well, maybe not hours. Whatever. I searched *Facebook* for group about getting arrested. I didn’t think about why as I did this. I think now it’s because it was a way of expressing my ambivalent feelings about the arrest, that I was a badass but a victim simultaneously. I think I also needed to know as I sat alone at my computer that I

wasn't really alone. That I was not the only kid that people exclaimed "You got arrested?" when it came up. Misery and humiliation love company.

I'd already joined "I or a Close Friend Got arrested Outside of Boar's Head This Weekend." While I wasn't technically arrested outside Boar's Head in the "great boar's head bust up of '05" I was part of the downtown Athens bust-up of '05. Besides the group made me laugh. Whenever I read the comments like "fuck bike cops" I chuckled. I may have been sitting at my desk on a Friday night because of their downtown tyranny but we were all in this together. I came across "I hate Athens Bike Cops." Perfect. I clicked "Join Group" with a not a little bit of glee. Haha. Asshole bike cops. The picture was of a cop riding a little pink bike. Its tagline read "Seriously, don't let them fuck with you: it just adds to their power trip."

"Mr. MIP here's to you" was probably my favorite. I could relate to its outright hostility to law enforcement and especially the bike cop. They just have no life, so they try to mess with ours. We were just average college kids having fun. We weren't hurting anyone. The cops were just bored and on a power trip because they're losers. It wasn't me. It wasn't alcohol. It was them.

I was walking out of English class, the first one of the fall semester. It was hot outside, but not unpleasantly so. I walked towards the Milledge bus stop lost in my own thoughts.

"Hey."

I turned around. It was one of the guys from class.

"Did you say you're from Decatur?" he asked, matching my pace.

"Yeah. I grew up there," I answered and stopped walking. Faced him.

"Where'd you go to high school?"

“Decatur,” I answered.

We both smiled and laughed.

“I’m from Tucker. I was just asking because I lived there as a kid. Off Coventry.”

“Oh, okay. I live over across from Agnes Scott College.”

As we talked about the class and how hard we thought the professor would be, I felt a familiarity, like I’d known him before. We had an easy chemistry.

“I know some people from Tucker. My old roommate Gwen dates a guy, Jason. I can’t remember his last name. He’s got a twin,” I said.

“The Maralinos?”

“Yeah that’s them.”

“I’ve met Gwen a few times. I’m Adam by the way.”

When I got back to the sorority house, I called Gwen immediately. He was cute, not to die for, but there was something about him. It wasn’t a meet cute of great romances but there had been a spark I thought. More like a magnet as I would find myself drawn to him unapologetically whenever he got too close during the rest of college. Gwen didn’t answer so I *Facebook*-ed him in the meantime.

Even though I thought probation would kill my social life, this first weekend at school was shaping up pretty nicely. Laura, one of my favorite people, an older girl in the sorority whose drinking habits I hoped to one day emulate was hosting a party.

After several rounds of flip cup I was talking with Laura’s roommate, Gillian and a guy she liked. He turned out to be one of Adam’s fraternity brothers. I feigned nonchalance but later whispered to Gillian to tell him to call Adam and invite him to the party. I wasn’t even sure if

this boy was cute a few days ago and suddenly I was desperate for his companionship. But the sudden (drunken) infatuation was not one-sided.

Soon after I'd pulled Gillian aside, I saw his figure walking towards us in the distance. I pretended not to notice and focused intently on flip cup.

I can't remember whose idea it was to go swimming, but Adam and I ended up at the pool. Beer cans and cozies and pieces of clothing were scattered on the ground. We stood on the side and everyone jumped in together. We came up laughing. Or was I the only one laughing? I don't know what it is about the water, the night, the summer, but suddenly, finally he kissed me. Our kiss was interrupted by cat calls from the other swimmers.

At his place we talked about Harry Potter and what we'd wanted to be as kids, movies, books, and anything that came up between long kisses. He'd wanted to be an astronaut as a kid. I'd wanted to be a marine biologist.

In the morning he was sweet, a little taken aback by the fact I'd woken up and called Laura to come get me. He asked for my number. I say yes but didn't give it to him. I dashed down the winding metal stairs when Laura called to tell me she was there. I wondered how I made it up them the night before.

Once in awhile when I drank I had what I would call a decent night. I didn't do anything too embarrassing, say anything to mean or inappropriate and didn't throw up anywhere. That first night Adam and I hung out was a decent night. A couple non-decent nights later and he wouldn't speak to me in class anymore. Spring semester he was gone, studying abroad and I'd moved on, I thought.

Chapter 8: Escape to England

Everyone loves fresh starts; New Years, back to school, going away to college. Part of the excitement inherent in them is sense of a new beginning. Spending the summer in Oxford, England was going to be mine, my mid-year, New Year. Studying abroad represented a clean slate, a blank page, an undiscovered location to be exactly who I wanted to be and was determined that person would be perfect in appearance, actions and everything else. I worked out religiously before I left, counted meals down to the calorie, packed only the clothes that fit my England persona. As I ran on my favorite treadmill, the one by the window, I pictured the English countryside that I would jog through each morning. I would rise before my classmates and appear at breakfast sweaty and flushed, but still pretty. Everyone would marvel at my discipline. MC and Jessica had confided that everyone puts on a little weight when studying abroad. This terrified me and kept me on the treadmill perhaps even more so than the idea of creating my perfect self for England.

Reading my study abroad journal is difficult. Some passages make me smile, some make we wince, others make me want to cry. This poor girl. She was hurting so much but she couldn't stop it. She didn't know how and she didn't know she needed help to do it. Reading back over those moments is hard when I know how much more pain is in store the girl writing those pages and she has no clue. She drunkenly stumbles into a lot more before she gets out and I hate knowing how much she is about to hurt and am helpless to stop it, to save her.

There was of course one detail standing in the way of my fresh start in Oxford, and it was James. During spring semester I'd started dating Jessica's friend James. As usual we'd hit it off at first. We had a few weeks of fun dates and then, there it was. He said to me "I really like you, but when you drink..."

I'd never forget the lonely feeling of knowing absolutely we were over. We'd gone to spring formal together. I got drunk and resentful over something he did or said or didn't say or do and ignored him the entire night. He sat at a table with Jess and her boyfriend while I flitted around the room and danced with other people's dates. The next morning I woke up alone in his bed, still in my dress. He had passed out on the couch after getting high. I changed into one of his t-shirts and was staring out the window when he quietly opened the door.

"What are you doing awake so early?" James asked.

I just looked at him in response. He knew it too. We got into bed and cuddled for the last time. I'd gone past the point where I could make it better. He was just bad as I was, though so I filed his remarks about my drinking away with what I considered other nonsense crap I got from guys.

I told myself in England we would start anew. In a foreign country, in the summertime, newly in control of myself, i.e., my drinking, and looking like I'd finally found my way off the bar floor to the gym, he would come to see me in a new light, maybe even want me back. In this hopeful/delusional mindset I messaged him on *Facebook*, wishing him a happy birthday and extending an olive branch in hope to leave the past behind us. He responded in kind. When I logged on and saw his message I felt relief. Everything would not only be okay, it would be perfect. That's not *exactly* how it turned out.

"Emilia, it's time to go," my mom called.

I stuffed a few more pieces of clothes into my over packed, bulging suitcase. I'd never been anywhere for six weeks before and it showed in my packing job. Six weeks in my mind might as well have been six years. I sighed and looked in the mirror a last time. I'd debated over

what to wear for awhile. I'd settled on jeans and a black Henley. My hair dark curls were straightened and then curled again to make waves. Wearing black and my hair rippled was rapidly becoming my uniform. At last count I had some hideous amount of black dresses like 13. My college friends couldn't believe I used to wear pink, all the time. I couldn't either.

My dad and brother loaded my giant suitcase and heavy carry-on into my mom's van. Despite their divorce we still did big things as a family. For this I am still amazed at my mother's ability to love her children more than anything else in the world. I imagine I wouldn't be able to be in the same zip code with my father if I were her without disintegrating into a crying, screaming mess. Yet there she was, smiles and kind words with the man who'd broken her heart and her family.

I can't remember what I felt as we drove to the Atlanta airport. My stomach did somersaults when I hugged and kissed my family goodbye. On the outside though I put on my poker face, the mean one, hoping I looked completely confident in what I was doing. I knew they were watching me until I passed through security but I didn't look back. I kept my face bored as if international travel by myself was hardly a big deal. Inside I felt insecure. As I went through the detector I felt small and alone. I needed something to feel better and relax. I did a once over of the terminal and then headed to a small bar.

Inside it was packed with other travelers watching Brazil play. I'd become fascinated with the world cup, and especially Brazil. I think now the obsession with Brazil was about trying to figure out a part of myself that felt amputated. I wanted to reclaim whatever was missing inside me, and I thought that might be my connection to my Brazilianness, my homeland, my culture. It was the same hollowness that I would imagine could be filled with men. Years later in recovery I would realize it was a hole created by my alcoholism, nothing else.

At the bar I ordered a beer and stood in the crowd watching the game. When I was done I ordered another one. That day I'd only had a salad, declining food at the restaurant my family and I sat at for awhile to pass time before I checked in for my flight. Beer number two was buzzing me but I still felt alone, out of place. It wasn't like in the movies where everyone watches something on TV and they all become drinking friends, invested in the outcome together. Then Brazil lost. I was disappointed, but I feigned true pissed-offness in the bar and sat in the terminal with my arms crossed. I could spot people who looked like other students on my trip. They were young, sat alone, but I didn't offer any smiles or sit by anyone.

The plane ride made my stomach hurt. They always do. I ordered wine at dinner because why wouldn't why? Later one of my friends on the trip would tell me how she got drunk on the flight over. I would smile and laugh at her story but really I was jealous. I wanted to have been woozy when we landed, socially lubricated, with a great story about meeting people on the plane and drinking with them. Instead I sat next to a man in his forties who spoke English with a heavy accent and slept the entire time.

My first entry in my journal doesn't really add up to the fresh start, a whole new world, awesome new people fantasy I had in my head. I felt alone and far from home. I emailed my mother that everyone had come here with a friend, boyfriend, cousin, sister and that everyone looked at me like I was weird. Everyone was placed in suites that were like dorms but I felt isolated in my little cottage. Really I'd lucked out. I'd landed a three floor cottage. One of us per floor. It was nothing special but we had more space than everyone else. My view was of Trinity's entrance and I saw everyone's coming and goings.

I sat by my window and vented to my journal "I hate, detest, loath the fact he [James] is here. I know that's not nice or fair but it's because I'm here where no one knows me and that is

exciting and scary at the same time except for one person who has known me at my worst and who will never be able to see me without the things from the past attached.”

Later that night and completely trashed I expressed those feelings. I was told by unfortunate witnesses we ended up in an argument in the bar. Not the start I'd pictured. Escaping to England for the summer and relishing in the fact no one knew me or that I couldn't handle my liquor was what some refer to as the geographical cure. I thought location would fix my problems. No wonder I was so mad at James for being there. He blew my cover. I didn't realize really I blew it on my own.

Our first weekend in Oxford I had a class excursion to London. We were to see Titus Adronicus in the Globe Theatre and do a walking tour of London. I wasn't much into eating my first week in England. I'd given up forced vomiting years ago but was just learning the ropes of restricting. Walking through the winding streets in the summer heat made me weak. While the group went ahead I said I needed to use the bathroom and ducked into a Starbucks. My don waited outside. I grabbed a coffee for caffeine energy and stopped on the sidewalk to down my iced latte. Beside me was a homeless man with a sign. I dropped a fistful of change into his cup. I liked his sign. I was also tired of lugging around heavy coins. I didn't remember what it said but he blessed me as I caught up with my don and rejoined the group. Later I discovered I'd dropped a small fortune into his cup. Unlike in America coins were worth something. All the “heavy” ones, were two pound coins, about four dollars each at the time.

My first friends I'd made in England, Naomi and Caroline, came to meet me in London. We got a hotel room and decided to go clubbing rather than return back to Oxford. We didn't know what we were doing and randomly picked a club that looked crowded and fun. It was expensive to get in. Caroline got plastered and I was annoyed because I wasn't drunk enough.

Someone named Bob Sinclair was performing that night. We didn't know who he was but happened to be up close beside the stage dancing when he came on. While he sang, he reached out and kissed my hand. Naomi and I laughed as the girl next to us made a face and tried to stick out her hand too.

Caroline tried to bring an Australian guy back to our room. This made me uncomfortable. We'd met him on the way to the club. He was cute enough but as the alcohol wore off I realized we did not know him. There were three of us but really only two since Caroline was so out of it. What if he tried to attack us, rob us, rape us, kill us. This is how it was when I didn't sleep between drinking and sobering up. My mind went from carefree and reckless trust of all mankind to rapid furious thoughts, panicking about death and the worst case scenario.

We told the Aussie to beat it and made it back to Oxford in on hungover piece.

It was Monday formal dinner. Penny-Ann, Amie-Mae, and I, who had become an inseparable threesome, each with a bottle of wine decided to drink before the evening lecture. We attended buzzed and giggling. I loved it. You could feel all eyes on us, in an amused curious way. We were drunk, but no one acted as if they thought this were wrong.

The dinner was filled with giggling and flirting. "Somehow" I landed a seat beside Ben, who I had found cute from the airplane. I could be very manipulative when I drank about big things like getting "lost" like in Savannah and in the littlest things like making sure I was sitting by someone I wanted to flirt with. Most of us were giddy and buzzed from drinks on the lawn, mimosas were always a favorite of mine, not to mention the seemingly bottomless wine served with dinner. I was beyond buzzed and know I was flirting pretty shamelessly with Ben. Time and alcohol have clouded the memory, but the pictures of me in his jacket, multiple ones of us with

huge drunken smiles and me with the vegetarian sticker that sat on my plate to let the staff know I was not to be served the regular meat meal but a special one stuck to my forehead, applied by none other than Ben.

Of course I fell and scraped my knee. Alcohol only makes the clumsy more so. Ben came upstairs to help me repair it. One thing led to another. I wonder now if he kissed me to get me to shut up already.

He left early in the morning with the sky grey and misty. The sun rose around 4 in the morning in the summer. I can't tell you how many nights I saw it rise, not having gone to bed yet. I couldn't sleep after Ben slid out in his high table clothes. Later in the day and during the following few days he was distant, awkward, dashing my naïve hopes that fooling around drunk in my room after high table meant he actually liked me. Penny-Ann and Amie-Mae assured me not to waste much thought on him. He had caterpillar eyebrows and was kind of dorky and annoying in large doses. It was rumored he was also a virgin, which only became Oxford gossip, after he confessed this to me that night, and feeling slighted I felt less than inclined to take it to the grave. For that I was sorry because it was no one's business, nor was it something negative. I wonder now if it being common knowledge that he was inexperienced in part fueled his many a hook-up while we were there. I was more embarrassed that by the end of trip that he had made out with almost everyone than the fact that he had spurned me. Whenever anyone brought it up I was careful to point out that we'd made out first and that everyone else was sloppy seconds. That's the thing about alcoholics, despite acting completely shamelessly, we still try to cling to the falsest of prides.

I was still sulking over Ben as the weekend drew near and Penny-Ann and Amie-Mae and I decided there was nothing like a weekend trip to Brighton to cheer me up.

If there was one good time in my drinking I might say Penny-Ann, Amie-Mae, and my stay in Brighton. Our hotel room was at the very top of many cases of crooked and winding stairs. Inside were two super-soft beds and a spacious bathroom. From our window you could see the bright beach of Brighton. We stayed in the first night, talking and sleeping comfortably. The next morning we trumped down to the beach for lying out and sipping drinks.

None of us knew that Brighton was not a sandy beach, it was a rocky one. The stones weren't exactly comfortable to lie on. The other group of UGA kids that came weren't far down the beach from us, and John and Blake walked down to visit us. Ben and the girls didn't. They simply sat and talked, no sunbathing or playing in the rocks. No one went into the water, but my buzz informed me that I couldn't come to a beach without getting into the water. It was like my obsession to see things without the screen of my sunglasses. I had to see them with my own eyes. The water was cold though, but I found a nice older gentlemen to kindly push me off a stone ledge and into the water. It shocked my system and I quickly swam back to the beach.

We were pleasantly giddy from drinking on the beach and were eager to find this so-called Mexican restaurant. We drank beer from a bucket and chatted and ate semi-Mexican food. During our dinner a man at a table next to us stood up and asked for everyone to be quiet. I yelled for everyone to shut the fuck up. Amie-Mae and Penny-Ann looked at me a little horrified.

“What?” I said.

Then the man proposed to his girlfriend. I'll always wonder if that's a detail they'll remember from the moment they got engaged, that some loud drunk girl shouted the f word. I hope not.

Another formal diner. I decided it was time to bring out my Marilyn Monroe dress. Black, back-less, cut down loooooooooow. I wanted attention, but not in the way I would end up

getting it. That Monday turned out to be a particularly rough one for us young boozers of Britain. I honestly don't remember much of mine. I know I sidled out onto the lawn for pre-dinner cocktails with nothing in my stomach but soon with a glass in my hand.

There's a picture of Penny Ann and Amie-Mae and me smiling, arms around each other on the bright, flawless lawn. That's the last thing I really remembered. I fade in and remember asking two women I didn't know how good my British accent was, then nothing. I fade back in and remember Luke and Naomi, Amie-Mae and possibly Anna in my room. I think I'm looking up at them but sideways as if I were lying on the floor across the room and they were standing scattered.

I woke up very early, sixish, gasping and my head painfully pulsing. No one else was awake and I agonized over what had happened. I burst into Amie-Mae's and she too was hungover, sleepy. I remember her feeling self-conscious over her actions that day. Her antics were nothing compared to mine.

I found out later I had had to leave high table because I was so wasted. Somehow I had offended one of the snotty girls, Marie, with the way I'd been eating. Apparently drunk-ass girls are not the most polite or delicate eaters the way Marie thought she was. Provoked by a comment, I said something to her, and Amie-Mae stuck up for me like any good friend would do. Then somehow I flung a knife and it nearly hit Leah, a kind quiet girl on the trip who didn't drink alcohol. It was the wait staff who helped remove me while I was quizzed them on how authentic my British accent was.

I'd sloppily asked to see James, which was of course not granted. I'd thrown up all over which Luke also a non-drinker cleaned up for me. When Charles, my housekeeper, came to tidy

up the next day I apologized as I handed him the trashcan with my vomit-filled towel inside. I said I'd had a rough night and asked for another set of towels.

I'd known better than to act like that. I should have called it quits with the drinking when Marie said something, or when I flicked a knife, or when any of the things happened that were listed in one of my favorite *Facebook* groups "20 Reasons a Girl Should Call it a Night..." But I didn't. I'd had absolutely no control.



20 Reasons a Girl Should Call it a Night:

1. I have absolutely no idea where my bag is.
2. I believe that dancing with my arms overhead and wiggling my bootay while yelling WOO-HOO is truly the sexiest dance move around.
3. I've suddenly decided I want to kick someone's ass and honestly believe I could do it too. ("bitch...i ain't playin'...")
4. In my last trip to "pee" I realize I now look more like Lily Savage than the goddess I was just four hours ago.
5. I drop my 2:00 a.m. sandwich from Jimmy John's on the floor (which I'm eating even though I'm not the least bit hungry), pick it up and carry on eating it.
6. I start crying and telling everyone I see that I love them sooooo much.
7. There are less than three hours before I'm due to start work or enter the class room.
8. I can't seem to stop making phone calls to people I haven't talked to in years.
9. The man I'm flirting with used to be my biology teacher.
10. The urge to take off articles of clothing, stand on a table and sing or dance becomes strangely overwhelming.
11. My eyes just don't seem to want to stay open on their own so I keep them half closed and think it looks exotically sexy.
12. I've suddenly taken up smoking and become really good at it.
13. I yell at the bartender, who (I think) cheated me by giving me just lemonade, but that's just because I can no longer taste the vodka.
14. I think I'm in bed, but my pillow feels strangely like the kitchen floor.
15. I start every conversation with a booming, "DON'T take this the WRONG WAY but..."
16. I fail to notice that the toilet lid's down when I sit on it.
17. My hugs begin to resemble wrestling take-down moves.
18. Boys you would never be attracted to seem to look amazingly hot... and you might end up kissing one or two.
19. I begin leaving the buttons open on my button fly pants to cut down on the time I'm in the bathroom away from my drink.
20. I take my shoes off because I believe it's their fault that I'm having problems walking straight.

-From the *Facebook* group "20 Reasons a Girl Should Call it a Night."

While mine was the worst debauchery of the evening it wasn't the only. One kid, John, sent out some nonsensical and strongly worded e-mails to the listserv with the trips professors and administrators on it, which I even had the audacity to make a joke to him about.

But no one looked at him differently, like a pathetic sloppy drunk. I knew in part it was because I was racking up a track record, even with people who had just met me. But I felt like it was more than that. I felt like in part it was because, they're guys. It's funny. It's acceptable. Guys can get wasted and say and do things and the next day those things are brushed off and forgotten, laughed at, bragged over during a round of beers. But, I knew deep down in the knots twisting in my stomach that there was something more to what my friends had to say than a double standard.

Penny-Ann instant messaged me that she and the others were a little concerned about my drinking. They wanted me to have fun and drink but my behavior at high table had been scary. This made me feel so low I still cannot describe it. The shame I felt was overwhelming.

Sitting on the walkway edge outside my cottage I sulk. Molly told me to stop looking so sad. That it's okay. But I couldn't muster a smile or even a normal blank face. I was devastated that I acted so badly, and in England.

Molly continued to try to comfort me. "Terry acted like that at Boar's Head once. She blacked out and was falling down and yelling curse words and didn't even remember it the next day. We had to basically carry her out and make her go home," she said.

"Really?" I asked pathetically.

"Yeah."

"I guess I just feel like everyone's annoyed with me."

"No. It's not a big deal."

“Everyone has those nights,” Amy P. chimed in.

“Thanks guys.”

“Seriously, it’s not a big deal. Don’t feel bad,” Molly said.

They walked off with sweet smiles but I know they had pity beneath their grins. I clung to the words “Terry acted like that too,” like a drowning person to a scrap of wood plank in the ocean, tightly as hell. See? I knew I wasn’t the only one. Alison Terry, or Terry as we called her was like me, a good student, sorority girl. “Terry acted like that too.” “Everyone has those nights,” I repeated for comfort. But one thing about what Molly and Amy P. said bugged me a little, scratched at the back of my mind like a tag in a shirt I couldn’t quite reach or when I did I couldn’t figure out exactly why it was itching me. It was the word “once.” What did they mean she acted like that once? I’d acted like that so many times I couldn’t count them if I wanted to. Terry acted like that too, but once. Once. Just once?

That was the day I swore off drinking, again. For six days. Just to see how it would go. I didn’t even make it four.

Feeling down and uncomfortably sober I indulged my other addiction, shopping. I spent the day walking through Oxford and dropping many a pound on small I’m sorry gifts for the ones who had to help/deal with me the most. For Anna, flowers, Luke and Jack, candy. I took Naomi out to breakfast feeling lower than low the entire time. She protested at my move to pay the bill as an apology. She said we all had nights like that. I insisted though because to her it was a fluke night but to me it was more. I felt the need to give something to those who had helped me instead of letting me pass out on the ground or choke on my own vomit.

While shopping I wandered into the British equivalent to an old Blockbuster Music or a smaller Best Buy, minus the equipment with only movie music and cell phones. I went to the cell

phone counter upstairs or up the escalator and bought some more minutes for my cell phone. Then I wandered the movie bins and shelves. I found *28 Days* and bought it without a second thought.

People often say that there is a song for every mood. I agree but I have also grown up believing there is a movie for every feeling, some character who has been where you have, who gets you. The way I felt that day was like Sandra Bullock's Gwen when she teeters out of the limo she just stole and crashed into someone's house.

I liked the movie but aspects of it felt unresolved. Perfectionists don't like open endings. I didn't get why she and her rehab romantic interest didn't work out in the end. When I watched the movie I surmised that she and Viggo Mortenson's character had some deep instant connection, that they were bonded by their situation, that they were instantly close, no explanation needed. I imagined my relationships to men were the same. Bonded instantly by booze and hot make-outs I could barely remember, I imagined in the morning that the insta-bond formed by beer and tequila would be intact. Now looking at the characters I realize their connection was just as superficial as mine was with the guys I hooked up with during binges. A wasted kiss isn't proof of anything, except of being wasted.

Amie-Mae and Penny-Ann joined me on the lawn, trying to console me as if it were everyone else who had messed up, not me. Anna told me she used to be just like how I had been that night. She said she used to be mean and curse at people and she just had to learn, not drink like that anymore. She told me this which seemed so unbelievable from this soft spoken, kind and beautiful girl. We smoked a cigarette and she hugged me tightly and told me not to feel bad about myself.

I began my weekends in England on a class excursion and ended the same way. My last weekend was spent with my history don and our class touring historic places in the English countryside. The morning we left, I felt hung-over, as I did most days. My clothes were so uncomfortable I wore sweatpants and my same Henley that was loose on the trip over. Nothing felt truly comfortable anymore, not my skin, my clothes, my stomach. Our bus was late and I wandered the bookstore, buying magazines and books and souvenirs.

On our trip I lost my voice. Blake teased me the most. Whispering “what was that?” at me. I thought it was a cold or something that caused it. I never thought it was alcohol tearing up my body from the inside out.

I got in trouble for touching things in one of the old houses we visited. During the walk I hiked far ahead of everyone. Dr. Arthur teased me. I didn’t mean to but it felt so good to finally do something with myself besides fill it with poison that my legs propelled my body forward.

The last place we went was an old church. Inside I wandered away from everyone and sat down in one of the ancient pews. I wasn’t exactly praying. I didn’t know any except, Oh God where’s the toilet. But I remember sitting there, willing myself to feel God, trying to feel something besides the hole that alcohol was cutting out of my heart.

While in England I swung from starvation and alcohol the first two weeks to the stuff your feelings down with food and even more alcohol the last four. Across the street from the campus was a tiny little restaurant that made baguette sandwiches. You could get a delicious sandwich for lunch and they were so big you could eat one and save the other half for dinner or the next day’s lunch. The sautéed peppers and creamy brie felt forbidden to me. I always operated on either a strict lettuce and 100 calorie pack type of diet or a binging free for all of

fries and nachos. Those baguettes tasted like something on the list of binge only foods. One time I ate a baguette sandwich just to throw it up, knowing with each bite that I would throw it up.

By the time we flew home my clothes were too tight. I bulged out of my skin. My skin and teeth looked bad. Bulimia, sleep deprivation and alcoholism aren't a pretty combination.

Because of the terrorist scare getting home was a disaster. We sat on the plane on the ground for 3 hours before departing. They told us they were checking the background of every person on the plane. I was never so happy to walk on American soil. I stepped off bloated, pale and irritable. At home I climbed into bed for what felt like days. When I woke up it was senior year and I had to get to the house for bid day. I also made an appointment with the counseling services because something was nagging at me to the point that I couldn't ignore it or leave it alone. A question. A question about who I was, where I would go.

Chapter 9: Who me? An Alcoholic?

Am I an alcoholic? I didn't want to be. My friends didn't think I was. There was no way in hell I was going to ask my family's opinion. James's words echoed "It's just when you drink." I kept *Sex and the City* on as background noise. The episode where Carrie dates an alcoholic is on. I didn't act like that though. I acted more like one of the girls. Sometimes I got drunk, too drunk like when Miranda's date left the number to AA on her table but everyone has a few bad nights.

I watched *28 Days* again and again on my computer lying in bed. But I didn't drink in the morning or drunk drive anymore. No one around me or on the screen represented what I was going through. The closest was the author of *Smashed* and she had learned to control her drinking, so I could too. And she said she was not an alcoholic.

Despite our culture's overall positive portrayal of alcohol, the alcoholic has remained marginalized and is often depicted in mass media as deviant. This is one reason I couldn't see myself in any of the media I used. This contradiction is noted by Nancy Signorielli in *Mass Media Images and Impact on Health*. She writes: "Alcohol is a very prevalent thematic element on television. Most of the images relating to alcohol focus on social drinking and present those who drink in a positive way" (111). Yet, "Alcoholics, on the other hand, although small in number, differ considerably from the typical character or even the typical social drinker on television. [...] alcoholics (in most media) are presented with very negative images" (105).

Despite my lows, I was still in school, still had a good GPA, hadn't wrecked any more cars. Despite being dumped for reasons directly related to alcohol, I'd never been fired, had avoided more trouble with the law, had friends who loved me. I wasn't the complete wreck I saw

presented as the alcoholic. And there was one other difference, at 21 I was young. Could you even be an alcoholic at 21?

Another Friday morning, I woke up at Studio. [what we nick-named my friends' apartment] Jamie was still passed out. I felt wretched, but why? I had decided last night to try and control how much I drank. I would only have four, or five, or six. I thought I'd done well at first, but I remember hitting number 9. I must have kept counting after that though. For some reason the number 16 stuck out in my foggy mind. What was crystal clear and made me feel cold as it rushed back to the forefront of my memory was what happened once we all got back to Whistleberry. Lauren and I had decided to go swimming. Drunkenly we'd jumped in the pool. I, only in underwear. Lauren plunged into the water still in her dress. The skirt fanned out into the water like a wide purple stain.

Theresa's boyfriend, Aiden, was by the pool. I think he'd been there first. Even now when I remember that night I feel a pang of shame. If one of my friends stripped in front of my boyfriend I'd be pissed. Aiden averted his eyes and asked us to please not drown ourselves. I remember apologizing to Theresa, turning red. She said it was okay. She's a better friend than I was.

Somehow Lauren and I thought running across the street would be a good idea. Gabby watched from the sidewalk, head shaking, along with a few guys drinking beers in their lawn chairs. A free show. Lauren and I ran in our panties across the three lanes of North Avenue. She clutched her chest while I flung my arms out wide. My small breasts bounced for all to see. Once we made it to the other side we stood there dumbstruck, like well, now what? We quickly scampered back. To this day I thank God we weren't caught. I cannot bear to think of telling my parents that I'd been arrested for running across a street basically naked, in front of boys that I

wouldn't recognize the next morning, wasted out of my mind, 16 or so drinks coursing through my veins, at 3 in the morning. More painful though would have been someone else telling them that's the way I was injured, struck by a car, or killed.

In her memoir, *Smashed*, Koren Zailckas talks about becoming less of herself when drinking as she strips and plays in the ocean waves for an audience at age 15. I knew exactly what she meant when I read her words. Alcohol always turned me into someone else, shards of her I could see glinting in the light of my sober myself, but the pieces formed a monster I didn't recognize when I drank. A monster who cussed, kissed strangers, backstabbed friends, hit cars, and ran half-naked across the street. I was terrified of that monster and felt sure I'd never escape it.

Every alter-ego needs a name. I named mine Jordan Baker after the vapid flapper Nick Carraway shallowly romances in *The Great Gatsby*. No one could ever guess who she was when I told said my alter ego was named after a character in a famous book. Gabby searched to figure it out. I thought if I said it and someone knew, called out, like from *The Great Gatsby* that they would have to be some kind of kindred spirit. A soulmate if it were a boy, a sister from another lifetime if it were a girl. I'm still waiting for someone to know who I'm speaking about when I say Jordan Baker.

The alter ego allows you room to quickly tell a lie about your name that sounds convincing because you didn't think of it on the spot. Jordan was especially believable as a fairly popular name for girls and boys of my generation. The alter ego also always you to coast over your bad behavior from the night before with explanations such as, it wasn't me it was Jordan Baker. Given her era, the roaring twenties, it helped me rationalize even more her intoxicated follies.

One of Jordan Baker's biggest mishaps occurred during semi-formal. After my date and I decided to have a drinking contest, I woke up to hands down the worst hangover I have ever had. Well, one of the worst anyway and my date, my friend Sam from Oxford, passed out beside me in my bed. We'd called it a tie around 50 drinks.

After he left and I lay around for hours I thought I'd feel better but I didn't. The problem was I actually liked Sam. He hadn't called though since he'd left after breakfast and hadn't said anything about us hooking up. Jessica came into my room looking about the same as I did. We decided to watch *Sex and the City* and eat cookie dough in my bed, a futile attempt to feel better.

"What season?" I asked her as I pull out my tapes and DVDS.

We decided on two, always a good one. Carrie by now is an old familiar friend. In the opening episode of season two, which I know by heart, she narrates about navigating a shared city after a break-up. Sam and I hadn't broken up. We were never a couple. But my investment, my feelings were like Carrie's for Big's. I wished I could remember more of what happened. Did I say something? Did I do something?

We watched as Carrie gets drunk at a baseball game. Miranda expresses annoyance, but Charlotte defends her: "She's allowed to be drunk. She's going through a break-up." Carrie argues "I'm not drunk I'm sedated from my pain." I wish I could be sedated too and long for her absence of mind instead of the hangover I have now.

Jess was feeling worse from the cookie dough and headed back across the hall to her room. I had to face being alone again, which I couldn't stand to do. Being alone with my thoughts after a night drinking was the most uncomfortable feeling in the world for me. I would rather have taken a shot, smashed the glass and eaten the shards than feel what I felt. To escape my own head I kept watching *Sex and the City* by myself. As the episodes rolled on Carrie asks

Mr. Big to stand still with her, be her boyfriend, after dragging him out at five o'clock in the morning. Yet whenever she fesses up her feelings drunkenly, it still works out. As the minutes slip by the feeling in the pit of my stomach lets me know that this tactic probably didn't work out for me and Sam.

I watched as Carrie kept messing up her relationship through her "Cosmopolitan haze." Hmm. I liked that phrase. Two weeks after semi-formal, I would swallow my fear and talk to Sam about what happened. I would tell him I liked him and he would tell me that he has started dating someone else. My drinking had ruined anything that might have been, as well as our friendship. Now we keep in touch about twice a year to say Happy Birthday.

Later when researching alcoholics, I stumbled upon an interesting book chapter. Emily Davis, a sober alcoholic, wrote about reflecting on her life and her internal search for factors that may have "caused" her alcoholism. Davis, who is not a mass communication scholar, wrote about how complicated the idea of media influence is on a person's drinking behaviors. She titled her chapter "Scarlett O'Hara made me drink.' Being Female and movies: Factors in My Alcoholism." Davis' father was an alcoholic, and though the heredity of the disease is strong, this is not what she focuses on, pointing out her brother did not turn out to be an alcoholic. Davis essentially talks about the parasocial relationships she had with movie characters, especially female characters who loved to drink. She asks

After seeing that every film had an alcoholic theme, I began to wonder if perhaps the films had been more than just an escape from a lonely childhood, if they were actually a factor in my alcoholism. If an alcoholic home environment can be a factor in developing alcoholism, why not the movies? They *were*, after all, my family; [...] Was I being indoctrinated to drink or was the message more subtle?"

Growing up in an alcoholic home, Davis recounts her particular identification with Scarlett O'Hara: "The fact that Scarlett and I grew up in the South and were the same age at the beginning of the film probably makes my identification that much stronger."

Davis's chapter was published in 1994. While her questions seem to suggest a strong sender, message, receiver effect from movies she is articulating that when all one sees is drinking, from an alcoholic parent or from a favorite movie character, using alcohol to deal with problems, "that was normal." I think Davis wrestled with what I would wrestle with ten years later, the real world environment of alcoholic drinking and the glamorization of it on television interacting with our alcoholism. Davis writes "all my girlfriends who sat next to me in those movie houses did not become alcoholics," which is true for me as well. Some of my girlfriends can quote *Sex and the City* almost as well as I can yet they didn't experience the same lack of control over their alcohol use. But I think Davis is on to something. I think the environment of alcohol abuse as something normal or positive is always out there and it's always dangerous. Sometimes it turns deadly for regular drinkers who have bad nights and get in cars or try dumb stunts, but it will always turn deadly for the alcoholic. It's just a matter of time.

After attempting to dive in and telling my feelings to Sam, which ended up feeling like belly-flopping onto cement, I went to visit my therapist. I recounted the night minus the sex and the 60 drinks. He said I'd done well, that I was doing well despite the situation with Sam. I wondered if he really thought I'd been healed or if he could see through my bullshit and lies and realized he'd never get through to me. Either way I didn't go back. I didn't need his help anyway. When my heart hurt I knew the burn of vodka was the best thing for taking the pain away.

Samantha: "His cup runneth over."

Carrie: delirious laughter.

Miranda: "It's official. You're drunk."

Carrie: "I'm not drunk. I'm sedated from my pain."

Charlotte: "She's allowed to be drunk. She's going through a break-up."

Samantha: "His cup runneth over."

Carrie: delirious laughter.

Miranda: "It's official. You're drunk."

Carrie: "I'm not drunk. I'm sedated from my pain."

Charlotte: "She's allowed to be drunk. She's going through a break-up."

-Sex and the City, Season Two.

“What, did you think we were going to like date or something?” Adam’s voice was steady but the taunting seeps through in his tone. I was silent for a moment. My usual dead-on sarcastic response mechanism was muted with shock and hurt that he would say that to me. And in that way.

“Um, *no*,” I said with as much indignation in my tone as I could muster. “I thought this could just be a fun sort of thing. You are the one who made it all weird.” After being rejected by Sam the only logical thing my lushed-out brain thought to do was go back to sleeping-over at Adam’s. Somehow in a university of thousands we’d ended up in a class together, again. Since coming back from study abroad, I’d been hanging out with him again off and on. Since I’d grown to like Sam, it had become more off, but when you’re out of beer, drink liquor.

A few minutes later he pulled up. I came down my stairs, casually of course. Making a huffy puffy entrance to make sure that he understood I so do not like him, that he was a last resort. Inside I was feeling confident again because if he didn’t like me, why would he be here. I got in and tossed my newly cropped hair, hoping he liked it. He didn’t mention it until later in bed. I pretended to be unsure about it and said it made me look like a little boy. He gazed at me with an odd, incredulous look.

“It does not make you look like a boy,” he said.

We kissed, hard and long, longing. We were both probably just lonely. I’m not sure who he was really lonely for. I wished it were me. Lying beside him even after how he’d talked to me I hoped that maybe he liked me, that he was putting up a front. Somewhere I know that it was me putting up the front though. Not to him, but to myself that I really didn’t like him that much and that if only I wanted we could be something. That was beginning to sound hollow to me. The

clutching anxiousness around my heart confirmed it. Even when I was with him my fix wasn't complete, because I knew it will soon be over and I'll be wanting again.

It was just another day. I didn't know what woke me up.

My head was positively throbbing. This was the worst headache I had ever had. 8:38. Shit. I sat up fast in bed. Felt sick and my head pounded harder. I could not miss class anymore. OK, get up. Get up. I stumbled to the bathroom, turned on my sink, splashed cold water on my face. The cold hit, cut but felt good. I felt more alert. Still felt sick. Used the bathroom. Spritzed perfume. I dashed to the kitchen, grabbing the blank walls of our oddly long apartment hallway a couple times. Coffee. Brewed some and dashed back to room to get dressed. I couldn't go to class in my downtown top and panties. I threw on a tank top, then a sorority t-shirt over it, then my burgundy velour sweat-pants, flip-flops and a black headband completed my hang-over outfit. Haphazardly I tossed my copy of *Bleak House* and my notebook, a pen, my calendar book, my phone- where, oh, there it was, under one of my pillows, into my Sigma Kappa tote. Back in the kitchen I poured coffee, a little milk, two sweeteners into a thermos. Perfect timing. I would just make it if I hurried. Oh wait, keys. Keys, keys. Where were my keys? I finally found them on the floor in my bedroom under the jeans I'd worn the night before. Now I'd be late. I hurried out of the apartment and walked as fast as I could up the hill onto campus. My head was still throbbing. If I could just make it through this class.



Yes, I Woke Up Today and Went To Class Wasted”

Here's to you, you trashed-way-too-often college student. You go out to the bars on a weeknight, knowing full and well you have class bright and early the next day. But that doesn't stop you from downing 8 tequila shots like a champ. After getting plastered, you return to your place of residence and pass out. But you're not a slacker, oh no, you get up and go to your classes the next morning, dammit. And as you take your seat you slowly realize how wasted you still are from the night before. Your dedication to alcohol and academics is equivalent to the strength of 19 small farm animals...whatever the hell that means.

-From the *Facebook* group “Yes, I Woke Up Today and Went To Class Wasted.”

Chapter 10: Hitting Bottom

“SB’07!”

That was our catch phrase. Before walking out of an apartment, hanging up the phone or finishing up a wall post we were sure to exclaim “SB’07!” Only two letters and two numbers but it translated into many things. Across campus it meant spring break, an escape from the daily drag of classes, slow buses and midterms. To many it meant beaches, bikinis and boys. For me it meant drinking, as much as I wanted, whenever I wanted, without consequence, care or judgment. It meant if I wanted to I could be drunk for the entire week and no one would think anything of it. After all everyone else on spring break would be doing the same thing and would be too drunk themselves to notice.

The week before Spring Break you can feel the excitement vibrating through Athens. Walking through North Campus on the way to class, you would catch pieces of conversations as you passed by other students. Instead of hearing “quiz” or “paper” or “all-nighter at the SLC” names of locations stick to your ears as you brush past a group of people. “West, (Key West) Cabo, (Cabo San Lucas) Miami (where college cruises often depart).” In class people asked in whispers “is it spring break yet?” as lectures dragged on and assignments were given. This was the time when the gyms were suddenly bustling after a sparse winter attendance and local tanning beds were booked by sorority row. Undergrads spent afternoons pouring liquor into washed out shampoo bottles and stashing them in their luggage. Grocery stores seemed low in their supply of coolers. My preparation included packing bottles safely so as not to break and spill their precious contents.

For my friends and me the “07” following the SB was special. It didn’t simply signify a year, another spring break, or one more year until turning 21. This time it marked the last of our

college spring breaks. We were all graduating in May and scattering into somewhat grown up lives. Sara was heading to DC, Jess and Erin to Atlanta. Jess was only staying in Georgia until getting into law school. I had the feeling of being left behind. I was going to graduate school in August but physically I wasn't going anywhere. When my friends traveled back to Athens to visit things they'd left behind, I would be one of them.

Miami was our destination. We'd booked a spacious hotel room in North Miami, right on the beach and not too far from the bars and clubs. It took us half a day to drive there. Erin and I stayed cramped in the back of Sara's car the entire ride mouthing the words and sometimes softly singing along to the songs on the four mixed CDs I'd made for the ride.

So bring me two pina coladas.

One for each hand.

Let's set sail with Captain Morgan

And never leave dry land.

Troubles I forgot 'em

I buried 'em in the sand.

So bring me two pina coladas.

She said goodbye to her good timin' man.

-Garth Brooks

Erin nor I had a "good timin'" man to say goodbye to but we filled the endless hours on the road by talking about our bad-timing, bad-intentioned guys. I hadn't slept over at Adam's in ages. Tim still seemed to be hanging out with one of our younger sorority sisters much to Erin's chagrin. But that didn't mean we couldn't theorize, analyze, hypothesize about what they were thinking and feeling about us and if by some stroke of chance we'd see them on spring break

even though I don't remember knowing of either Tim or Adam having spring break plans anywhere near where we would be.

The first time we went out on the beach the sun had been gone for hours and it was so dark, pitch black, that I couldn't tell the sky from the sea. Above us was empty of stars and the air was thick with salt air and loud with the sound of waves. I bounced around and dug my toes into the sand. This was it. Our senior year spring break. I felt so grown up at that moment. Going all this way without protests from my mother. It was like in the movies, four girlfriends headed to the beach for drinks, tans, dancing. I could escape in Miami from all that mess back in Athens, Adam, James, my slipping grade in Art History. Messes I'd created and that really only I was tied to. I let it consume me, not the other way around. It wouldn't be until I got sober that I would realize I'd had the power to cut the rope and drop the dead weight of failed relationships all along.

After six years of drinking and hangovers I still had not mastered sleeping after drinking. In the morning while my friends snuggled in to the blankets I tied my sneaker laces into double knots and slipped out for a run.

Little blue and purple jellyfish who'd washed ashore to their deaths sprinkled the sand for as far as I could see. Every few feet there would be one, their tentacles splayed in death, their squishy bodies looking like globs of jelly dropped onto the sand with an ice cream scoop. Why didn't they all lie together in one big jellyfish pile? It was as if the waves cruelly lined them up close enough to see each other but still out of tentacle reach, gasping for air together, but facing death alone.

I ran on. Past the jellyfish the sand got whiter. Not as solid, harder to run on. I cut over onto the walking path partially shaded by palm trees. I slowed down to walk and rest. My

drinking habits didn't keep me in the best shape. It was hard to push my body on the outside, my legs and arms, when my liver and kidneys were working so hard on the inside. I ran again until I reached the end of the beach and stopped at a wall built to create a waterway. A pelican rested on the weathered down wood but flew down below as I approached. I watched it for awhile listening to "Blue October" through my earphones.

"I wanna swim away but don't know how.

Sometimes it feels just like I'm falling in the ocean."

Sometimes I felt like this, like I was drowning. Usually the morning after. I couldn't stand to be alone those days. I would run from one friend's house to another.

"Let the waves up, take me down.

Let the hurricane set in motion."

I bounced from the couch of one friend to the foot of the bed of another friend sometimes to figure out what had happened. What I'd said. Who I'd called. Who I'd embarrassed myself in front of. Who I needed to apologize to.

"I calculate what I had done

Like jumping from the bow

Just to prove that I knew how"

So much of what I did was reckless. I jumped from the bow every time I got wasted, every time I went home with Adam and then pretended in class I was too tough to give a shit. Every time I drunkenly kissed, fooled around with, slept with someone, I was trying to prove to myself that I knew how to be desirable without realizing I was jumping from the bow into a swirling whirlpool with no plan for getting back on the boat. I was drowning then but still didn't know it. I turned around and jogged back to the hotel.

I screamed.

“What?” Erin or Jessica or Sara cried.

I howled and cursed and held out my arm for answer.

I’d burnt myself. We were getting ready to go out in downtown Miami. My hair was naturally curly and I knew there was no way I’d be successful at straightening it. The beach air had won and I was encouraging my waves along with the curling iron. We’d been drinking all day. Somehow I was numbed enough by alcohol to put my arm down right onto the scorching metal barrel of the curling iron and not feel it instantly. I was however not drunk enough to not feel it at all feel and how much it goddamn hurt when I did finally jerk it away.

I ran my arm under cold water. I blew on it. Nothing seemed to help. I decided drinking as much as I could as fast as I could was the only thing to stop my arm from throbbing. Because of the way my skin welts when it’s irritated, something that had baffled quite a few dermatologists, my arm seemed to hold the pain. I felt like it was still burning even doused in icy water.

My arm stung the way it did when a lighter exploded in my face. My eyelashes and parts of my eyebrows and the baby hairs that curled from the top of my forehead fell singed into the candle jar and on my bed. I thought I had burned my face off, but it was my hand that was burned. The one that had been holding the lighter.

It was in the evening. I was sulking in my room after an embarrassing night downtown. I’d lit a vanilla candle in a frosted candle jar, sitting on my bed. Instead of placing it back on the nightstand, I pushed the butt of the lighter into the warming wax lost in my thoughts about what I had done the night before. I was momentarily too lost in shame and depression and emotion to

think and remember that lighters are flammable. With a hideously loud sound the lighter exploded in my hand. I gasped and dropped the candle and the lighter. All I felt was heat and flame and a burning. Jess and Alix burst through my bedroom door. I was clutching my face with my hands, terrified to move them away. All I could think about was an episode of Oprah with a woman who had been in a car accident. She'd been trapped in a blazing car and her entire face burned off. She bravely took the stage and talked to Oprah and the audience about resilience. All I could think of was the blank non-face that was her face. When I saw her I had mixed emotions of pity, horror and admiration that her spirit could be so resilient. But as I clutched my face, not knowing how bad the damage was, all I could think was "not me."

I cried "Do I still have a face?!" Alix and Jessica coaxed my hands down. Apart from the burnt hairs and my reddening arm, there was no damage.

"What happened" they questioned. "We heard a terrible sound, a bang, that sounded like something had fallen over."

I told them. The candle exploded. It lay on its side on the floor intact.

"It was the lighter," Alix said.

That made more sense. I was still too shocked to think the explosion through. I teared up as I realized my hand was in pain, stinging like it was still being touched by flames. My hand was beginning to welt too. I got more hysterical. Sick of hurting and of myself. Alix soothed me and convinced me to take a shower. The water made it burn more. Another painful injury, courtesy of my drinking. In Miami I was burned again, senses dulled by drinking.

We eventually made it out of the hotel and into downtown Miami. I don't remember the drive. I don't remember trying to get into a certain club with a long wait and a velvet rope. When my friends told me I tried, and failed, sweet-talking the bouncer into letting us in and lapsed into

a tantrum, I thought I might vaguely recall something like that. I don't remember why I thought it would be a good idea to leave my friends once we'd found a bar to hang out at for drinks.

Thoroughly trashed, I somehow made my way to a Little Italy type restaurant. All the way I was on my phone texting and calling people I shouldn't. Leaving messages that I was glad I was too drunk to remember. I bought a piece of cheese pizza from a place that had it displayed the way diners display cakes sometimes. It was inside a glass cylinder with silver shelves. I devoured my slice, thinking, hoping it would make me more sober. Wandered back to the bar. Everyone had gone from worried to pissed.

"We've been looking all over for you. Where did you go?" Erin asked.

I can't remember what I told her. Sara got over being angry with me first after I agreed to go with her to hang out with a guy she'd met, Seth. I didn't remember how she met him. Later when she went out with him on her own and I asked how she'd even come across this guy, Erin and Jess would look at me strangely and tell me I'd introduced them. Didn't I remember?

Apparently I was walking to the bathroom and saw a Latin American woman cleaning. Drunkenly I started talking nonsense to her about being from South America. The woman only spoke Spanish. Sara was trying to translate for me when we met Seth. He was walking to the bathroom and happened to speak Spanish. He translated to the woman my wasted chattering. I hugged her before she and Seth guided me away from the poor woman. I wonder if she worried about me, judged me. Did I trouble her? Scare her about what her own daughter, sister, or niece was out doing?

At Seth's place Sara and Seth walked out onto the balcony. I sat on the couch with Seth's friend? roommate? cousin? tax attorney? At first I did my best drunk flirtation. He didn't seem interested, but as my liquor began to wear off a little I realized I wasn't interested. We were in

the kind of situation that women's magazines warned against. What would my mother think if she knew I'd driven with Sara, who had been drinking, to a strange guy's apartment? Feeling uncomfortable as guilt and a twinge of fear began to set in I walked out onto the balcony to where Sara was. We drove back to our hotel. She insisted she could make it, that she wasn't drunk anymore and told me how she and Seth liked the same kind of music.

The next morning I woke up as usual after getting annihilated the night before, way too early. It was just after 7:00 am. At the earliest I'd gone to sleep at three. I felt completely miserable and didn't realize I was still drunk. I thought I was sober, but the note I wrote to my friends would later prove otherwise. I had crouched in the bathroom and scribbled it on a hotel notepad. I left it on a counter, barely legible in slanted handwriting. Like the time I finished a collage of pictures for my mother severely hungover. It was a gift for her that I'd worked hard on and then ruined in the end. The writing was all crooked, stealing attention away from the work I had put into selecting and placing the pictures just so. Later my mother fixed the collage and rewrote the quote herself. I always wondered if she knew. What else but alcohol would lead me to be so careless with something that I'd wanted to be perfect?

The note I wrote to my friends pleaded for forgiveness for running off and scaring them. I said I needed help, that I would get help. I said that I loved them and I would need their support as I sought help for my drinking. Afterwards I lay in bed until finally falling back into uneasy sleep.

When they woke up they didn't care anymore. Drunken dreams of their own perhaps erased their annoyance with me. That day the focus turned to Sara. She was ditching us for Seth that night. None of us were comfortable with the idea of her going off by herself with him. We suggested having him come to meet all of us for dinner or something. She ended up going

anyways and ignoring our concerns. When she left I was worried about her, but part of me was relieved that for the time being I wasn't the one being the bad friend in the group. As we drove home to Atlanta I gave up on my idea to get help and not drink. I would just take it easy and drink with better control.

Within a week I was drinking again as if spring break had never happened.

Alix and I decided we needed a night out. Just a week night in downtown Athens to take the edge off. The semester's end was looming, which meant final papers and exams that could cost me the 3.5 I'd clawed myself back up to after freshman year's drinking destroyed my GPA. Boys were causing the usual headache for both Alix and me. She and her longtime on-again off-again boyfriend were off-again but fighting like they were on-again. I was still smarting from James's rejection of me as a date to my sorority's spring formal. I'd called him (wasted) in Miami and left him a sloppy voicemail asking would he go with me, even though things hadn't worked out between us. He politely declined the Monday we got back to school saying he had to work. (Read I would rather be anywhere else with anyone else than with you at formal when you are drunk and crazy). While I was pissed could I really blame the guy? Ever since we met and across two countries it had been one thing after another, and somehow it always came down to me being completely shit-faced.

Jaded by boys and consoled by each other and vodka, Alix and I put on brave faces, fresh make-up and headed downtown. I remember walking into Allgood, my favorite bar, though now I'm not sure why it was, and then blackness. Wonderful, horrible blackness. I longed for its oblivion and feared what it compelled me to do. Either way, like a steadfast lover it was always there, waiting for me.

Blacking out had become an odd thing to me. On the one hand I feared them, what I might say or do, or that even when I wanted to avoid a black-out, they seemed to be happening more frequently. But on the other hand when I was uncomfortable in my own skin, the nothingness that black-outs provided me fueled the desire for one more shot, or beer, or glass of wine.

My black-outs were never absolute. Like a drowning sailor my conscious mind would wildly kick for the surface once in awhile, gasp for air, scan desperately for help, before sinking back down underneath the dark waves. I remember running into James and seeing his roommates. I remember being fake nice with them. I don't know why any of us do this, pretend we like people when we're drunk as hell when both parties know they are mutually despised. I recall seeing my high school friend Jeff. He was with his roommate. I can't remember what we talked about but I sense that I said or did something wrong. This feeling will be validated when years later I haven't seen or spoken with him since. I faded back out. When I resurfaced I was outside the bar with Alix telling her I'll be okay, that she can leave. She gave up. A few minutes later Adam pulled up. Then I faded to black. I woke up around seven. I looked around and Adam's room came into focus, his bed, his pictures, his always open closet, his sleeping figure beside me breathing softly, deep in sleep. I laid there waiting. I didn't want to wake him. I didn't go to class. I just lay there, immobile, thoughts a blurry jumbled mess. My head throbbed, my throat felt like sandpaper, but I didn't move to get a glass of water or search out the Tylenol, to call a friend for an escape ride. If I moved it would all become real. If I stayed still maybe I could fall back into oblivion and when I woke up it would all have been a dream.

Alix and I sat outside our apartment building smoking cigarettes and talking. She remembered more than I did. She recounted that she wasn't sure what had happened between James's friends and me but somewhere between our fake friendly chit-chat and waking up at Adam's something had gone sour. Alix had come upstairs at Allgood's and seen me walking by James's friends as they jeered at me. Ever the good friend, she had told them off and tried to get out of me what happened.

Our smoke curled up into the evening sky, a poisonous gray snake in search of others to ravage, not satisfied with our pink lung tissue.

I hung my head, deep in shame. Jess was mad at me too. James was her friend. She didn't understand why we kept getting into shit when we drank. I told Alix I think I needed help. I questioned if I should stop drinking.

"I don't want for you to have to do that," Alix said. "I want for you to be able to drink and have fun and be able to control it."

But I can't.

"It was the same with me," she told me. "I had to learn to get to that place where I can have fun and be drunk but not lose control or black out."

I exhaled. "I don't know if I can do that."

"It's just I know what a real alcohol problem looks like. You can do this," Alix said.

Alix's mother is an alcoholic. That's why she and her sister lived with her dad growing up. She didn't think I was like her mom. What neither of us understood then is if I kept drinking I would be.

Alix went inside. I told her I wanted to stay outside a little longer. The cement curb is scratching at my legs where my cotton shorts end. But it wasn't as uncomfortable as I felt inside.

I looked up at the sky. Rivermill was disgusting, crumbling and old, but it had the most beautiful views of the sky. The sunrises over the “river” were the most beautiful I’d seen. Some mornings the sky looked like it was on fire. That evening it was a light cold blue and cloudless, uncluttered. Unlike my mind. All I could think about was what Alix had told me about James’s friends yelling at me as I passed them in the bar, what Gavin had written on Christina’s *Facebook* wall about seeing me at Allgood (which I didn’t remember) looking “drunker than a hobo in a liquor store,” his exact words. I wondered what I’d I said to Jeff, if it was mean or hurt his feelings. I wondered what I had been like with Adam. He told me when he picked me up I was fake crying and saying I’d lost my friends. I didn’t remember sleeping with him but the torn condom wrapper on his night stand told me that we had. This has to stop I told myself. Spring formal was this Saturday and I decided I wouldn’t drink. This would be the big test. I didn’t know it then but I would fail, as always. I still had one drunk left in me that wouldn’t hurt me as much as others but that would push me over the edge and slamming into the rock hard bottom of my disease.

It was formal. I invited my next door neighbor, Chris, as a last resort and set up Erin with Blake to get her to go too. I told myself I wouldn’t get drunk at formal. That way when I ran into James later –because of course we would go to Walker’s– all he would see was me beautiful with my date and wish he had come with me.

Everyone comes over to pregame. Lizzie brings trays of jell-o shots. Jell-o shots aren’t really drinking. Over ten later I don’t feel drunk enough. At dinner Chris gets me a drink while we wait. Over appetizers he lectures me on not waiting to have children. I drink to escape his words. He’s so nice and has been asking me out for years, but he was just not my type. Too clean-cut, too nice.

By the end of the night it was just Blake, Jess, her boyfriend Ian and me. The drama that comes with drinking had sent everyone else in our group home already. Erin had gotten wasted and bawled outside formal about Tim being there with one of our sorority sisters instead of her. Chris had finally given up trying to dance or talk or spend any time with me as I managed to disappear anytime he was near. I had seen both James and Adam and decided Jaeger shots were the only way to take the sting out of that. We stopped to ring the bell on north campus at 2 in the morning as the four of us stumbled home.

It was awkward as Blake left. I couldn't believe what had happened. Once we got back to the apartment Blake came in my room to sleep. We had platonically shared a bed before. I loved him but like a friend, but the alcohol had overridden what I knew to be true in my heart. We'd ended up making out before I freaked out and left the room to call James. Blake was a good friend of his and I left a cringe-worthy ridiculous message about not wanting anything to happen with Blake, because it would mean nothing could ever happen again between me and James.

In the morning that thought didn't faze me. Instead I was tormented by the fact I had crossed the line of friendship with my best guy friend from Oxford. It was Blake, Blake. The idea of us being awkward or drifting apart, the way I had with Sam killed me. He had become one of my best friends. Would I lose him now too, because I was wasted?

In my desperation never to be alone after a night of drinking, I called Chelsea and Lizzie to come over. Erin, Jess and I recounted the night with them in the living room. I perched on the floor. We all laughed at Lizzie's reenactments. Our laughter was familiar and comforting, yet mine was empty. I loved these girls with all my heart. Some of the times I'd spent drinking and

laughing with them I would never change, no matter how painful the aftermath was for me. But I couldn't do this anymore. Something had finally snapped, broken, shattered.

Without saying anything, I got up and walked down the hall to my room and closed the door. I stood and looked at myself in the mirror. I looked like shit. My hair was dirty, greasy looking and flat. My face was rounded. Pale and splotchy. My body didn't feel right. And my eyes, the whites were cloudy, their irises dimmed. If I kept this up, I was going to die. I had drunk a lot the night before when I promised myself I wouldn't drink. And then I couldn't drink enough. I'd never achieved my familiar black-out state, where I could forget everything stupid I'd said or done. This time I remembered and I couldn't hide behind failed memory anymore. Alcohol had finally stopped working for me.

Chapter 11: Nowhere to Go but Up

Later that afternoon, after my sorority sisters had trickled out of the apartment, I knew I needed to take action, do something, do anything, to stop feeling the way I did. I opened up my computer, but our internet wasn't working. Something was always malfunctioning at river mill. If something wasn't broken, something was wrong. Rusty feeling and hungover, I walked to the SLC and signed on a computer. Looking over my shoulder, paranoid someone would see, I typed "Athens GA AA" into yahoo. There was a meeting later that evening, several in fact. I decided I would go, that night. But I didn't have the guts to go until Wednesday. For three days I'd been fine. Did I really need to go to an AA meeting? Even as I talked myself out of seeking help, something was gnawing at me that said if I didn't go before the weekend hit, I might never, and I could possibly never recover from what happened the next time I drank.

I tightly clutch my steering wheel, though my car is parked, staring unsure at the peeling white house before me. My heart beats in my ears as I force myself out of the car. Others pull up around me, crunching over the gravel. I walk around the house to where several people stand smoking. I guess I won't be winning an Oscar for my attempt to not act lost, because a guy around my age asks "Are you looking for the meeting?"

Caught, I confess: "Uh yes, the 5:30 Happy Hour. I've never been here before." The people on the porch perk up now that I have solidified my status as a first timer.

"You can follow me honey," says a kind woman. I thank her as she leads me inside. We pass empty rooms, shabby like the outside and walk up stairs. At the top, a doorway stands open with cigarette smoke streaming into the hall. Didn't these people know it was illegal to smoke inside? And it's probably a bad idea in this tinder box.

As I step in, a man with glasses and curly hair stops me. “Drug court,” he says.

“Excuse me?” *I’m a drunk, not a drug addict. Then it clicks.* “Oh no. I wasn’t court ordered here.”

He smiles. “Most people your age are.” *My age. What’s that supposed to mean?*

“Oh, well I’m not here because I was arrested,” I try to explain. “I mean I have been arrested, but not recently. That was about a year ago...” I ramble like an idiot.

He smiles again, my awkwardness palpable. “Well come on in. You’re in the right place.” And he was right. I had made it to my first AA meeting and I was 22 years old.

That day was over two years ago. It feels like a different lifetime, because it was. Today there is no chaos, no alcohol-induced craziness. Life still happens, but I don’t handle it with a Bloody Mary, or several. When I stopped drinking certain problems I believed were lifelong afflictions cleared themselves up. The type of twisted, shallow and detrimental relationships I had with men evaporated. How I felt about myself became less critical and more loving. I did become more critical of the environment around me though and certain people, places, things had to go.

Today I firmly believe that there is nothing in this world that could make me pick up a drink, but that doesn’t mean I feel that way everyday. There are times when I romanticize a drink. When I see pictures of my friends on *Facebook* with raised glasses toasting the camera or sing along to Margaritaville or watch a romantic comedy in which the couple spills their affection for each other over drinks, I have moments of wishing I could be like that too. These moments have become fewer and further between. All the words, all the images, all the people, I used to prove to myself that my drinking was normal I had wrapped around myself like a

blanket, insulating myself from the cold. Once I stripped that buffer away, I couldn't hide from the truth, that drinking that way was killing me.

Recovery is simple, but it isn't easy. When I went to my second meeting, I was shocked to see one of my older sorority sisters take a seat a few minutes after it had started. I avoided making eye contact with her, embarrassed to be seen at an AA meeting. But then I realized she was there too. Angie had been sober for about two years then. Once the meeting was over we talked on the porch and she told me how her life was different, better. This girl I used to drink with at socials was changed. She glowed. She was happy. She was herself. I realized that the drinking I thought was normal was anything but. What Angie had, that was normal, and that's what I wanted for my life.

“So here I go with all my thoughts I’ve been saving.

So here I go with all my fears weighing on me.

Three months and I’m still sober.

Picked all my weeds but kept the flowers.

But I know it’s never really over.

And I don’t know.

I could crash and burn.

But maybe at the end of this road,

I might catch a glimpse of me.”

-Kelly Clarkson

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