

Cleaning Up, How I Gave Up Drinking And Lived

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Sample chapter

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introduction

I'm cold. My hair's stuck to my face. I'm trying to open my eyes but the sun's too bright. I'm cold because the bathwater's cold. It wasn't like that earlier. It was dark then and the water was hot, as hot as I could stand it. My neck hurts from where I passed out with my head on the side. It's light outside. Shit. This wasn't supposed to happen. There's a dirty glass on the floor. Actually, my neck is really stiff. The light's too bright. I have to move. I'm cold. The water's cold. Get me out of here.

I stand in the living room. Ashtray. Tinfoil. Lighter. Nearly empty vodka bottle. Lights glow on the amp. Nick Cave. It's warm with the sun coming in. I walk around naked. Neighbours interested across the way. I go back into the bathroom and slump on the loo. Mission aborted.

I'm alive. This wasn't the plan, but I'm still alive. Although I don't know it quite yet, it's the end of a twenty-three-year love affair.

Imagine going out tonight, and not secreting a small plastic Evian bottle full of vodka about your person before leaving the house, most of which you'll polish off in the queue anyway. Imagine not feeling the need to drink a bottle of red wine before making a pass at the person you've fancied for months. Imagine not watching someone's body language as they stand at the bar, moving in like a starving cat as soon as they order a round. Imagine not grabbing unattended cocktails from tables as you walk past, nor panicking when your glass is empty, nor sweating when the wine bottle hasn't come your way yet. Imagine not following groups of people you hardly know back to the home of someone you've never met, because there's talk of beer in the fridge and the promise of so-and-so coming round later to drop something off. Imagine not having on-off group sexual relations with people you either don't know very well and don't especially like, or who are already perfectly close enough friends, but, after a long night and a few bottles, pills, tokes or snorts, become more intimate than is necessary for a friendship. Imagine not spending the whole of the next day apologising to people for something you don't really, truly, remember doing. Imagine not spending the whole of the next day, or the day after that, eating Mini Rolls in a darkened room, surrounded by crushed and stained newspapers that you've read twice because you forgot it all instantly the first time. Imagine not forgetting to brush your teeth and take off your make-up, both of which have become long-forgotten indulgences anyway.

Once upon a time, I couldn't imagine living any other way. I used to be a proud participant in UK pisshead culture. I did the white wine thing and the vodka thing, and launched myself joyfully into the consequent, almost inevitable poly-drug use. To paraphrase Madame Lily Bollinger, I drank because it was Friday night, but also because it was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and because it was the weekend. I drank because I was in despair, and because I was slightly annoyed. I drank when someone hadn't called for a few days, and I drank before going to meet them when they did. I drank when I was bored, and when I had too much to do. I drank because I was lonely, and because there were twenty people that I just had to see.

I was an ardent consumerist and a champion of quality: more times than I can remember, in more pubs than I can count, on returning from the bar, I would offer my glass, suspiciously, to a friend, for their verdict on whether the doubles were in fact singles, or whether the singles had been watered down, or whether there was any alcohol in my glass at all. If I hadn't had a drink before going out in the evening, and found myself caged and sober, in a bouncing, rumbling tube carriage on the way to Soho, I used to think I was going to have a panic attack.

The feeling would not abate until I was happily tucked in at a bar with a glass in front of me. Seated before the start of a large event, I would become increasingly irritable, and then desperate, if no wine was immediately available.

At times, I used to wonder if I had a problem, but decided that, because so many people I knew seemed to be drinking far more than I was, I wasn't the one with the problem. And anyway, I was, most of the time, a strict, clock-watching 6 p.m.-er, and I almost never threw up, or passed out, in public. And I never lost a phone. Or a credit card. I sometimes did quizzes on websites, which told me I was *probably* an alcoholic, but by the general public definition – i.e. my friends – I was not. I never put vodka on my breakfast cereal. I never drank in the mornings, unless I was still up. I rarely blacked out and lost whole swathes of a night, searching back through my bag for clues as to where I had been, and how I got home. I rarely passed out on public transport, and never ended up in Birmingham. I rarely flaked out in anyone's front garden, unless I was an invited guest. I almost never had public crying jags, and was often congratulated on my pristine make-up at sunrise. In fact, my acting skills were second to none. I could be crying my eyes out, then answer the phone and sound absolutely fine. The more hung over I was when I went out, the more beautiful and sparkling people told me I looked. Perhaps I should have capitalised on this more – become a club hostess or escort perhaps – because I was, in fact, hung over nearly every single day of my life.

Like so many millions of others, I felt a powerful sense of entitlement to get pissed and have it large until I fell over. It was my inalienable right, as constitutional as the notion of the Free Country invoked by old-school greengrocers when ordered to use metric weights. As the years passed, I noticed a self-righteousness in myself and in the other women I drank with, about our consumption of alcohol, that was bested only by our competitiveness when consuming it together. At their worst, women have a disturbing capacity to jump up like puppies at a proffered biscuit when there is an opportunity to compete with each other, for however shallow or short-term a goal, like a petty triumph at work, or a moment's one-upmanship around a man. I was no different. But you can't blame me, really. Alcohol doesn't answer back, tell you that you look fat, or loftily enquire after your position on the property ladder. Alcohol is easily, and legally, available to anyone who's got the money to pay for it, and it isn't a jealous lover, because it knows you'll always come back. My relationship with alcohol was the longest of my life. It began on sofas at home, and ended over two decades later, after a long, inexorable downward spiral of life events, like a rock-fall in slow motion. Alcohol itself can't be blamed for what happened,

but it had me firmly by the hand and helped me go – and more's the point, remain – where it was neither beneficial nor useful for me to be.

I gave up drinking on the 12th of September 2002. The earth did not crack open and give forth fire-breathing three-headed dogs. No trumpets sounded in the sky. I didn't get a telegram from the Queen. Perhaps I should have, because only a public declaration of pregnancy, or cancer, would have elicited a similar reaction from those around me. Of course, there are differences between pregnancy, cancer and sobriety. The pregnancy would eventually have ended, and the responses to the cancer would have changed over time, depending on the progress of the disease. It's only to the self-declared ex-boozer that people say, 'Wow! Still?'

I should say now that I didn't spend time in detox, or in a halfway house – although there were points in my life where a bed in a nice, secure clinic, with fresh flowers and group therapy and kind people looking out for me, would have helped me a lot. This means that I have no anecdotes about the recovering rock stars, models and famous comedians that I would have met 'in group', although I inevitably met a few before I decided to stop. I also attended very few 12-step meetings. But, after six years, I have got a lot of new friends who have only known me as a sober person. Living without alcohol is one of the strangest experiences I have ever had. And it goes on being strange. I've chosen to write about it because the world we are all exposed to through the media has become increasingly cartoonish. There's so much *stuff* out there vying for our attention, that only the biggest, nastiest, and loudest manage to get it. You'd think that you've got to have been a truckstop hooker at twelve, a heroin addict at fifteen, and twice imprisoned by the age of twenty-one, and, during that time, you've got to have been repeatedly raped by a multitude of uncles, priests and nuns, and slept rough for at least six months, or your experiences just aren't bad enough. Misery is too easily represented by checkboxes. If you haven't got enough horror points, the thinking goes, then you really ought to keep quiet about it. I'm trusting that not everyone believes this, because your life can fall into misery without you ever ending up in a clinic. Because you don't have to be hitting on – or hitting – cab drivers, and waking up with a broken leg, to be suffering at the hands of alcohol.

For more than twenty years I thought that alcohol was the only way to feel whole as a person. It was my passport to seeming, and acting, normal. Whether I was out with other people, or alone at home, it was the one friend I could rely on to be there for me, despite the fact that it bit back viciously every morning. To be able to give that up was about as likely as winning the lottery. But I did it.

Sobriety is still weird, even after six years. To understand living sober you need to understand living drunk. In my world, living drunk didn't mean I was drunk all day. That's just another stereotype. Just the anticipation of intoxication can be enough to get you through the day, or a whole week. Sometimes it's all you have. about being an introvert in a world designed for and run by extroverts. I once saw a television documentary about an autistic woman who found going into supermarkets unbearable, because there were just too many colours and letters coming at her. So, someone designed a pair of glasses for her that were tinted pink, so that when she went out, everything looked black and white with a rosy tint, and she was fine. When the world became too exhausting and frightening, alcohol had the same role for me as those glasses.

My drinking story is about being British in a world that hasn't forgiven us our empire, or its loss, and respects us even less for leading the world today in getting publicly hammered. (This state of affairs persists even in late 2008, despite the well-documented increase in alcohol related violence, the increase in cirrhosis of the liver in those traditionally seen as far too young to get it, and the abject failure of the new licensing laws that were supposed to turn us into paragons of self restraint, but of course did not). My drinking story is about being female in a world that has not yet fully decided what to do about women. My drinking story is, above all, about looking for love, and finding it in all the wrong places.

a note on names and identities

I've changed some of these. While this is very much a book about me, it feels somehow wrong to call it my autobiography. It's a portrait of a state of mind, to try to explain what it's like to be someone who only feels complete, and safe, then they're boozed up - no matter how wonderful their friends and lovers are, nor how many opportunities come their way.

a note on memory loss

Although I rarely blacked out and lost whole chunks of a night, that doesn't mean my memory is crystal clear. There are times when I can remember a good time, when all we did was laugh, but when I try and remember what actually happened, and what actually made me laugh, it's all a blur, as if I'm reaching into a hologram. This, I guess, is the true freedom of drinking, the happy place that alcohol and drugs take you to – oblivion without loss of control. Ultimately, what I remember best of all are the days when reality bit back.