

Chapter 4 Plastered

I nod and aim a fake smile at the group of parents streaming into the kindergarten classroom. I sit in an impossibly small wobbly chair and pray for the familiar combination of nausea, self-loathing, and light-headedness to subside. As the teacher welcomes us and begins walking through a typical day, I lean in to hear more and immediately jump up and run out of the room in search of a restroom, a bucket, or a garbage can.

I stop to consider that drinking that bottle and a half of wine the night prior, despite plans to have much less, might not have been very wise. Here I am the next day paying the piper, like someone in a B movie, playing the role of Irresponsible Mother, sitting on the hard floor of what looks like the Seven Dwarfs' bathroom, shaking and heaving, praying no one walks in. I sit unmoving, resting my head on my arms for nearly an hour. I end up missing the whole open house, and for the first time I begin to wonder if I'm an alcoholic.

Since becoming a mother five years before, I've longed to hang on to a part of myself that isn't smeared in Mommy goo. The part that laughs at parties, looks good in heels, and earns a living while spending quality time with loved ones. I want to be the anti-June Cleaver, the un-wife, the un-mother, loving and present, but not invisible or brainless. And while it is gravely oversimplifying to say this is why I drink, drinking does begin as a bulwark against the onslaught of mama drones, an enjoyable evening ritual, a life raft—cheaper and easier to do with young children than yoga or running. Only later does it become the best part of every day.

As my marriage starts having more bad days than good, I feel like a thirty-six-year-old woman with a true gift for picking the wrong men. When you are raising young children, it is utterly frightening how quickly your relationship can devolve; how swiftly you stop talking about anything but dinners and laundry and school outings and grocery shopping. If there are dark ominous clouds hanging over our house, I don't see them clearly. All I know is that I'm exhausted and lonely and can barely see straight. And of course, I'm drinking more now than ever. I begin to wonder if I'm ever going to be able to provide a stable, happy life for my daughters.

The thing about parenting in this situation is that the walls between you and marital happiness seem inexplicably high and insurmountable. So I come to a decision: Regardless of my unhappiness, I'll soldier away so that my kids might have the stability and consistency they deserve. I decide that throwing my shoulder to the wheel on this one is the right thing to do. No wonder I'm so tired all the time. At some point along the way, I make a few deals with the devil. *If you let me be in love with someone else, I'll stay. If I can keep drinking, I'll stay.* Martyrdom doesn't suit me very well.

These deals I make with the universe under cover of darkness are deadly, particularly when they try to guarantee happiness for my children. As if the universe is a vending machine, where happy endings can be purchased if one has correct change; a matter of odds and probabilities rather than luck, chance, healthy living, and hard work. As if I can bargain for my children's lives.

Are other mothers like me? Do they believe they should lay down their lives for their children, if not literally, then figuratively? Since I'm not in sub-Saharan Africa, or Iraq, or on the brink of homelessness or poverty, I prove my love and devotion by setting aside my own happiness for theirs.

I'm hopeful to undo the last generation's erroneous belief that happy marriages mean happy children, and that two people locked in marital warfare are better off free, and so are the kids. In my experience growing up, no-fault divorce made way for no-fault desperately grieving children. In sixth grade, after my parents divorced, I

remember standing on that playground with an empty pit in my stomach, thinking I was the only kid whose parents didn't live together anymore. Wondering whose house I would choose. As if anyone could choose to live without a heart, a liver, a lung. As if anyone could pick whether to amputate their right or their left leg.

Even with these memories, I understand what a relief it must have been—after generations of unspoken misery, of housewifely serfdom, to break free of social judgment and constraints; to take a lover, or a job; to live independently for the first time since marrying in one's early twenties. I can and do understand, but I also know what it is like to be a child whose parents divorce. I know what it is like to have one's world ripped into pieces.

And so I bargain away and hope for the best and pray that some clarity or answer will fall from the sky, all the while living with someone who is a stranger to my heart, but whom I care for and respect and see as a friend, someone who helps raise my daughters as his own, not perfectly, but with hearty effort and consistent presence. That we have little chemistry or deep connection seems irrelevant to the mother in me. Besides, I say to myself, no one raising young children has time for anything but stories, cooking, cleaning, and baths anyway. It may feel empty and frightening and hopeless, but at least our family is intact.

Drinking gives me bargaining power and helps me keep my commitments. I've never been married this long, never been able to stick it out, but on another level this is sick. And this level of illness seeps so deeply into my bones that by the time I try to get sober, I feel like I need a whole new skeletal structure, a new heart, and a brand new mind.

On the surface I stay sassy and edgy and champion other mothers' need for time alone, for love and reading, for many worlds beyond raising young children. In public I am the rebellious swearing mama who is lively, saucy, and driven. In private, I shudder in fear in the corner, as I lie myself into believing that alcohol isn't the destination, only a ticket to the real journey. I can force this marriage to work. I can control my drinking. I can cajole my husband to be who I need him to be. I want to be the kind of mother who never talks about diapers or potty training, who doesn't dream of boring you with which child did or didn't wake Mommy up last night. I want to be the kind of mother who loves her children without losing herself and whose sassy sense of humor is slightly off kilter, and makes husbands deeply uncomfortable. "I need this," I say to myself while pouring that first glass of a crisp white into a pretty glass. My shoulders relaxing, I look at my three kids through narrowing warrior eyes and think, "Bring it!"

But wine as proxy for happiness and joy, as something mind expanding and extraordinary, doesn't work very well in the long run. At least it doesn't for me, and very quickly a few glasses becomes nearly a bottle and then more; all day thinking, *When can I drink?!* I like to believe that alcohol vaults me beyond my limitations as a child-corralling frump, a working stiff with a second shift in the evenings, but all it really ever does is wipe me out and shut me down to the pain of living in the world when one refuses to admit the truth. It's not clear how long this downward spiral takes, or when I begin shaking in the mornings, or dialing a helpline and hanging up, or when I start lying to myself about my own unhappiness.

Other than to my children and a few close women friends, I rarely tell the full truth to other people in my life, revealing instead only small parts of the story, as they enhance or add amusement to whatever circumstances require: sassy mama friend, responsible employee, faithful wife, adoring mother.

There is a real life hidden in there somewhere, but it is buried underneath denial and a whole bellyful of liquor. I'm the puppet, and alcohol is the puppet master. This inclination to hold some things back, stay quiet and private, is of course intrinsic to the human condition (especially when one has children, a mortgage, and a marriage). The trouble begins when the faking and the leaving out gets bigger than the whole truth, until

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eventually the actor becomes the story that he has written for himself and the play isn't even true anymore. There is no possibility of real connection because everything is an animated cartoon and there is nothing to hold on to.

What began as a life philosophy, as a cool refreshing glass of wine on a sunny patio with friends, was turning into an addiction and a spiritual disease. It ceased being about relaxation and fun and slipped down into just getting by, barely surviving the motherhood thing, and the life thing. It began to require an ever-increasing amount of liquid support.

I start doubting my ability to get by, a doubt that wears away my confidence and turns me into a person living on wishes and dreams and hopes for a better day, that will always, inevitably, happen later. Later—the curse of those, like me, under the misapprehension that life is an endless boundary water to be dribbled and drabbled away while the real story, in which I emerge triumphant and in a ball gown, is delayed again and again. For those like me, who rely on the fiction of a perfect tomorrow, drinking is an absolutely fabulous pastime—just enough of something to keep real life at bay.

As the un-June Cleaver, I mock the notion that as the mother I am the emotional center of my home. I resent my own importance and so try to shrink down, and simply refuse to matter as much as I really do, but motherhood hunts me down and feeds on me like a cat feeds on a broken-winged bird. It is not optional, and not fungible. It cannot be gotten rid of, at least it can't for me.

Somehow I've lost the belief that I can handle motherhood and marriage. How can I, who am so obviously flawed, have these beautiful and blameless small people in my charge? Motherhood gets too big to manage, and I want to be perfect. I want to be everything good and loving and patient and kind. I want to save my daughters from every sick, broken part of the human heart, especially if that sickness and brokenness belongs to their mother. I only realize much later that the drinking makes everything worse. Much worse.

One afternoon, I start drinking at 1 p.m. This early afternoon drinking is starting to seem like a very good idea, and it happens with greater regularity. When I take that first sip, I feel decadent and rebellious. My stomach is warm and ticklish and my spirits immediately lift. I look like a 10-cent sommelier breathing in the sweet white wine, dreaming of all the good things that will happen later. This afternoon, the kids are playing outside, and I sit on the back porch and watch them perform their headstands and kicks and floats with calls of "Look Mama!" and "Watch this!" echoing in my ears. I'm slowly fading away from them, but they don't seem to mind or notice as long as I nod and agree that this or that trick is fabulous. My older daughter later acknowledges that sometimes I use a "pretend" voice, and I figure this sunny fake afternoon voice is the one to which she is referring. I'm so checked out that I don't notice until several seconds later that my youngest is struggling in the pool. My little golden-haired angel.

I throw down the glass and leap up to grab her out. She's sputtering and scared, but fine. I'm not. I'm gripped by the sure knowledge that any number of terrible catastrophes could befall my kids if I drink like this. I'm completely flattened, floored, and humbled. I pledge right that moment to lay off. When my husband comes home that evening, I tell him that I want to "cut back" my drinking, but without telling him of the afternoon's catastrophe. He heartily agrees that this is a good idea and asks what he can do to help. "Nothing. I can do it," I say, and I decide that what I need to do is try much harder.

For two days I don't drink anything, but I'm shaky and worried and impatient. Pretty soon, I decide that a glass or two is fine as long as it's after 5 p.m. And so for many months, I decide that my kids will be safe as long as I drink after my husband gets home from work. And if I can keep from drinking heavily until after their relatively

early bedtime, they won't be any worse for it.

I fall asleep regularly very early, and I pick fights with my husband. I'd been so ignorant of the signs of alcoholism, despite growing up with a practicing alcoholic, that I didn't realize all this falling asleep early was really passing out.

In my quest to avoid wearing an apron and losing my brain, I harbor a deadly desire to be everything to my daughters, and therefore, eventually, nothing to myself. Throw in a beef casserole, and I am actually worse than June Cleaver. I am the neurotic stepsister of Snow White, Cinderella, and all the girls sleeping forever and waiting for the prince's kiss. Fast asleep until I can bear my own imperfection, the road winds downward, until I stop.

One night, I am drinking when I look up after spraying some words around and see where they have landed. Like shrapnel, they have torn through the tenderness of our late evening family room, where the children have so recently unloaded the toy box and spilled graham crackers on the floor. Though they are now upstairs asleep, we can still hear their echoes, and it is just the two of us remaining. I in my stupor, and he in his chair.

I remember saying something akin to "I don't love you anymore. How can you bear to stay with me knowing how I feel?"

I can't remember the exact words, only the aftereffects: the look of someone involved in an emotional prizefight left standing in the ring, surprised that someone so small and previously kind can deliver such a deft right hook. Surprised and hurt and quiet.

He says this to me: "Rachael, you're becoming mean."

And I stop and listen to the sound of my own undoing.