

Smashed

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STORY OF A DRUNKEN GIRLHOOD

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PREFACE

THIS IS THE kind of night that leaves a mark. When I surface, its events and the shame of them will be gone from my head, cut away as though by some surgical procedure. I will not miss the memories that were carved out of me: when my father carried me in his arms through the sliding glass doors, my head lolling the way it used to when I was the little girl who he carried to bed. When a friend, being interviewed by the doctor treating me, had to answer "vodka," which is like a curse word, in the fact that we exploit it in private but don't dare utter it in the presence of adults. When a row of people looked up from their laps because the scene of a girl, dead-drunk at sixteen, momentarily distracted them from their midnight emergencies.

I won't remember the chair that wheels me down the hospital's hall, or the white cot I am lain on, or the tube that coasts through my esophagus like a snake into a crawl space. Yet I will retain these lost hours, just as my forearms will hold the singes of stranger's cigarettes in coming years, as my back will hold the scratch of a spear-point fence, as my fingers will hold griddle scars from a nonstick grill. This is the first of many forgotten injuries that will imprint me just the same.

When I surface, there won't be any spells of shivering or gut purling, any percussion between my temples. I won't need to follow the doctor's orders: "Tylenol for discomfort." There will be no physical discomfort. My body will be still and indifferent, but mentally, the soreness of the overdose will linger.

It's strange the way the mind remembers forgetting. The fact of the blackout won't slip away like the events that took place inside of it. Instead of receding into my life's story, the lost hours will stand out. Something else will move in to fill in the holes: dread and denial that thickens with time like emotional scar tissue. In the absence of memory, the night will be even more memorable. The blackout will stay with me, causing chronic, psychic pain, a persistent, subconscious thrumming.

MY INTENTION, in telling this story from the very beginning, is to show the full life cycle of alcohol abuse. I did not begin by drinking from steep glasses, viscous concoctions of rum, gin, vodka, and triple sec, and I did not start off blacking out or vomiting blood. Like most abiding behaviors, my drinking was an evolution that became desperate over time: I found alcohol during my formative years. I warmed to it instantly. Like a childhood friend, it aged with me.

I grew up in the Northeast, a white, middle-class teenager among other white, middle-class teenagers, which plunks me down in one of the highest demographics of underage drinkers. I am also Catholic, a faith that some researchers find increases the odds that teenagers—particularly girls—will drink, and drink savagely.

I started drinking before I started high school. I had my first sips of whiskey not more than a year after I first went to a gymnasium dance or first dragged a disposable razor over one knee, balancing myself on the edge of the bathtub. I had just burgeoned the new breasts I needed to shop for blouses in the juniors' department. I had only just crammed my blinking dolls and seam-split stuffed animals into a box in the attic.

I drank throughout high school, but not every weekend, not even every other weekend. It was the promise of drinking that sustained me through all of high school's afflictions: the PSATs and the SATs, report cards and driving tests, and presidential fitness exams.

In high school, I sought out booze the way boys my age sought out sex. At parties, I leered when girls unzipped their backpacks, hoping to catch the glint of a bottle; and my own sly glances reminded me of the boys who leered when girls bent forward, hoping to glimpse their breasts through the necks of their blouses. The brief encounters fed me. For weeks, I'd relive swilling rum in a graffitied bathroom stall during a Battle of the Bands, vodka in the wooded perimeters outside of a football game, tequila at a sleepover after somebody's mom fitted a nightlight into the wall and announced she was going to bed.

I drank through college, too, with an appetite that had me drinking rum by the half-liter bottle, until I couldn't squelch the

impulse to unload my secrets to strangers, or sob, or pass out wherever I happened to be standing. I drank until I'd forgotten how much I had already drank, and then I drank more.

For four years, I drank aimlessly when I might have been doing things that were far more gratifying. I might have been forming real friendships, the kind that would have stretched into adulthood, and had me in ill-fitting bridesmaid dresses at half a dozen best friends' weddings. I might have been writing stories or taking pictures. I might have been sleeping a full six hours a night, or eating three square meals a day, or taking multivitamins. I might have been learning the language of affection: how to exchange glances or trace a man's fingertips with mine. I might have been reading the top hundred books of all time.

I drank after college. I drank through my first real move, my first job as an executive assistant, my first insurance forms, my first tax filing, and my first apartment where rent was due on the first of the month. I drank after the real world revealed itself to me like a magic trick, after I saw the method of adulthood, the morning commutes and mindless jobs, which shattered the illusions I had about it.

And at age twenty-three, I gave up drinking altogether once I realized how much it had cost me.

STILL, I am not an alcoholic. As far as I can tell, I have no family history of alcoholism. I am not physically addicted to drinking, and I don't have the genetically based reaction to alcohol that addiction counselors call "a disease." In the nine years that I drank, I never hid bottles or drank alone, and I never spent a night in a holding cell awaiting DUI charges. Today, one glass of wine would not propel me into the type of bender where I'd

wind up drinking whole bottles. While I have been to AA meetings, I don't go to them.

I am a girl who abused alcohol, meaning I drank for the explicit purpose of getting drunk, getting brave, or medicating my moods. In college, that abuse often took the form of binge drinking, which for women, means drinking four or more drinks in a row at least once during a span of two weeks. But frequently, before college and during it, more time would pass between rounds, and two or three drinks could get me wholly obliterated.

I wrote this book knowing that my alcohol abuse, though dangerous, was not unprecedented. Nor were the aftereffects I experienced as a result of it. Mine are ordinary experiences among girls and young women in both the United States and abroad, and I believe that very commonness makes them noteworthy.

In the past decade alone, girls have closed the gender gap in terms of drinking. I wrote this book because girls are drinking as much, and as early, as boys for the first time in history, because there has been a threefold increase in the number of women who get drunk at least ten times a month, and because a 2001 study showed 40 percent of college girls binge drink. When you factor in increased rates of depression, suicide, alcohol poisoning, and sexual assault, plus emerging research that suggests women who drink have greater chances of liver disease, reproductive disorders, and brain abnormalities, the consequences of alcohol abuse are far heavier for girls than boys.

I also wrote this book because I wanted to quash the misconceptions about girls and drinking: that girls who abuse alcohol are either masculine, sloppy, sexually available, or all of the above, that girls are drinking more and more often in an effort

to compete with men, and that alcohol abuse is a life-stage behavior, a youthful excess that is not as damaging as other drugs.

You can find girls who abuse alcohol anywhere. We are everywhere. Of the girls I've known over the past nine years, the ones who took shots, did keg stands, toppled down stairs, passed out on sidewalks, and got sick in the backseats of cabs, there have been overachievers, athletes, dropouts, artists, snobs, nerds, runway models, plain-Janes, and so-called free-thinkers. Some wore oversized sweaters and lacerated jeans; more wore ballet flats and rippling skirts and fine-spun jewelry that glimmered. Even holding a pint of the headiest beer, they retained the qualities that people call *feminine*.

Girls don't drink in the name of women's liberation, for the sake of proving we can go drink for drink with the boys. We don't drink to affirm we are "sassy" or "self-confident," which newsweeklies have lately suggested. Nor is our drinking a manifestation of "girl power" or "gender freedom" or any of the other phrases so many sociologists interchange with happiness. On the contrary, most every girl I've known drank as an expression of her *unhappiness*. I too drank in no small part because I felt shamed, self-conscious, and small.

To me, it is no surprise that underage drinking has spiked, given the fact that so much of it is dismissed as experimentation or life-stage behavior. Parents tend to brand alcohol abuse as the lesser evil, as a phase that is far less actionable than drug abuse. As a drinking girl, especially a college-aged girl, I assigned happy hours and the subsequent hangovers to behavior that was expected of those my age. I believed the people who romanticized those years, the ones who told me to embrace irresponsibility before I was slapped with the burdens of corporate adulthood.

For many girls, alcohol abuse may be a stage that tapers off after the quarter-life mark. Many will be spared arrests, accidents, alcoholism, overdoses, and sexual assaults. A whole lot of them will have close calls, incidents they will recount with self-mocking at dinner parties some fifteen years later. Some of them will have darker stories, memories or half memories or full-out blackouts, that they will store in the farthest corners of their mental histories and never disclose to their families or lovers. But I fear that women, even those women who escape the physical consequences of drinking, won't escape the emotional ones. I fear some sliver of panic, sadness, or self-loathing will always stay with us.

I HAVE always loved Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Grown-Up," which speaks of a girl who stands bravely before the world's fear and grace. We're assured she "endured it all: bore up under / the swift-as-flight, the fleeting, the far-gone, / the inconceivably vast, the still-to-learn, / serenely as a woman carrying water moves with a full jug." I could recite that poem in my sleep, and yet I recognize that I have never been that girl. Instead of shouldering adulthood with all my young courage and strength, I dropped it after the first impossible hoist, when it all felt too unmanageable. I wrote life off as heavy cargo, and accepted it could only be mastered by masterful men. I was a coward. I grasped on to alcohol, which was the first available escape.

Nine years after I took my first drink, it occurs to me that I haven't grown up. I am missing so much of the equipment that adults should have, like the ability to sustain eye contact without flinching or letting my gaze roll slantwise to the floor. At this point in time, I should be able to hear my own unwavering voice rise in public without feeling my heart flutter like it's trying to

take flight. I should be able to locate a point of conversation with the people I deeply long to know as my friends, like my memoirist neighbor or the woman in my reading group who carries the same tattered paperbacks that I do and wears the same footless tights. I should be able to stop self-censoring and smile when I feel like it. I should recognize happiness when I feel it expand in my gut.

Some of the most interesting research findings in substance abuse involve women who began drinking regularly in their preteens. Clinicians report some of these women, who seek treatment for alcoholism in their mid-to-late twenties, not only look younger, but act younger, too. Some turn up at clinics wearing kids' clothing and cradling teddy bears. Some still play the way children do, by twirling hula hoops and blowing bubbles. When faced with conflict, they just totter away. It seems some women's emotional development arrests as a result of alcohol. They stall at the age they were when they had their first drinks.

While this manifestation is extreme, it hits close to home.

As a twenty-three-year-old, I am mistaken daily for nineteen (seventeen if my hair is pulled into a ponytail and fifteen if I'm wearing Converse sneakers). Too many days, people make me aware of my own childishness. I am aware that the clerk behind the counter calls me miss instead of ma'am, telemarketers still ask to speak to my parents, and after years of financial independence, every handyman who turns up at my apartment still makes a snide remark about "Daddy paying my rent." I am aware that the fourteen-year-old girl I tutor in English is a head taller than I am; and while I craft arguments that burn my cheeks because I never spit them out, she extends her opinions even when they aren't complete. I am aware that somewhere

along the line, I've subconsciously turned down the pitch of my speech, like a silencer of a gun that softens the sound of its firing. Now, even when I yell, I don't feel like I am using my full voice.

I MIGHT have waited to quit drinking. I might have kept abusing alcohol for at least five more years at the pace I was moving. I might have waited for alcoholism to fall like an axe. Or I might have tried my best to "drink responsibly," even though setting responsible limits is complicated by my physical smallness; plus the sheer fact that I'm female means the same amount of alcohol affects me differently every time.

In the end, I quit drinking because I didn't want to waste any more time picking up the pieces. I decided *smashed*, when it's used as a synonym for drunk, is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When I stopped drinking, I never experienced the high-on-life sensation that so many people say consumes them like the Holy Spirit in their first months of abstinence. I never felt the buzz that people report feeling once they discover they can thrive without alcohol, once they dust off their sober faculties and realize everything still works. Abstinence did not help me rediscover the world with childlike awe. I never felt inspired by the simplicity of nature, by the dependability of sunup, or spring's yawning blossoms.

I didn't feel the ecstasy of returning to a life that was unaltered by alcohol because no such life ever existed for me. For nearly a decade, alcohol was the mold that shaped me. Once it lifted, I felt the immediate terror of having no framework. Without drinking, there was nothing to structure my weekends, my relationships, or my self-image. I felt my confidence cave in on itself.

For me, abstinence has been nothing but growing pains. It

has meant starting from scratch, reliving my awkward phase, and learning all over again what it means to be adult. It's meant I will act like less of an asshole, but *feel* much more like one. It's meant learning that drinking will always be more socially acceptable than abstaining. It's meant discovering I am more cautious and introspective than I ever allowed myself to be, and I will never again dance in public, which is probably preferable.

After a decade of alcohol abuse, I find myself going back over the chronology, trying to pinpoint when I might have averted it. Mentally, I go back to my university, to the row of bars that is located just across from the health center and wonder if anything could have lead me to the south side of the street, to tell my story to a man with a notepad instead of a man with a bar rag, to switch counselors. I remember the first kiss that tasted like sweet malt and then the subsequent ones, the boys whose breath held the must of wine or the ethanol of whiskey, and I wonder would my story have turned out differently if boys had played no part in it? I go back to the bite of my first drink and wonder, what if I had been sixteen or eighteen instead of fourteen? Would age have lessened my attachment?

I apply all the questions to my story that the experts employ: I wonder, What if I'd never seen an alcohol ad? What if there were no glistening bottles and bodies to catch my attention between the pages of magazines or on freeway billboards? I wonder what if the legal drinking age was eighteen? I ask myself whether any legislation might have made my drinking moderate.

My story has no real turning point. There is no critical moment that might have changed my whole narrative. My alcohol abuse, like the issue of all underage alcohol abuse, has its roots in more than one factor. Just as drinking pervades our culture, it diffused into my personality. I grew into my abuse, like the oc-

casional tree you can find on a nature walk, its roots spilling over both sides of a boulder like outspread fingers, in spite of the rock's lack of soil, moisture, and stability. To see it only at the height of its maturity is to wonder, Why build on that?

My alcohol abuse was a seed that fell at just the right time, in just the right place, when all the conditions were just right to nurture it. To understand the outgrowth, I have to go back to the first bottle that fell out of the liquor chest and into my ready hands. I have to go back to the beginning.

BEER TEARS

IN THE FALL of my sophomore year, I am still a virgin. For someone who has been drunk enough to lose as many jackets and wallets and bits of sterling silver jewelry as I have, it's hard to believe that I haven't lost this, too. After all, one study reports that 60 percent of girls have had sex by their high-school graduation, and the majority of those who haven't will have their first sex in college. Plus, a study by the Institute of Alcohol Studies in the UK that polled a thousand women found that a third of them had had unprotected sex after drinking too much, and almost half had a one-night stand they wouldn't have otherwise considered.

Still, through all the weekend parties where I've sipped vodka

straight-up and gone wobbling through strange bedrooms, whacking into door frames, and bumming cigarettes from boys, I know I've stayed as chaste as an unscooped sugar bowl. That certainty lasts until two days before winter finals, when I open one eye after the soundest sleep of my life.

THROUGH THE sting of consciousness, there is too much information to process. The time of day, for instance, is wholly undeterminable. The room is like a casino in its clocklessness. Hot, white light is spewing through the bay window, but it means nothing without a directional gauge. If the room faces east, it might be seven in the morning. If it points west, it might be midday.

I know I am on the second floor of a master suite in a fraternity house that I usually wouldn't be caught dead in. It is the Greek organization that at S.U. harbors painfully preppy boys. I am lying in the fetal position on a full-sized futon, under a patchwork quilt that looks like someone's mother might have made it. The bed is on a lofted platform, atop a wrought-iron ladder that I vaguely remember being nudged up.

Beside me is a boy I recognize as a senior, a political science major named Skip. I met Skip briefly at a party two weeks ago. The introduction is dwarfed in my memory because it was the same night that Chris stopped me in the stairwell to hold my hands and make a beer-teary apology. I'd followed Chris home that night and slept in the bow of his arm, feeling violently happy until the morning, when I felt the same old deadlock: His closeness made me tremble, and I crept out the door while he slept.

I barely know Skip, but I know I don't like him. He is smug in a distinctly male way. He has calculated facial stubble and the

type of ego that is hatched from early admission to law school and a family yacht named *Never Again II*, tied up in Newport.

The one time we spoke, he made it clear that the feeling is mutual. He hates girls like me, the ones who have difficult names and thrift clothing. He hates those of us who are pale where we should be tan, dark where we should be blond, sullen where we should be smiley, and mute when we should be fawning.

I decide he even looks like he's swaggering when he's sleeping. He is facing me, with his eyes pinched closed and his lips pulled into a pout. I'm not happy that I've passed out here, but I'm not alarmed by it—not until I move my hands under the quilt to quietly roll myself away from him, and realize that I am as naked as the day I was born.

THE SITUATION is almost sci-fi. I feel like I've been reborn into a whole different reality, and whoever transported me has rubbed out my memory. My body is as sapped of energy as any screen heroine's after she has swapped realms or bodies, and I am experiencing the same wooziness. My lower back cramps. My limbs shirk orders when I tell them to move.

I try to retrace last night's steps:

The night began at a campus bar, where I didn't drink much. I had, what? two, maybe three, shallow glasses of white wine before the party filtered out. It tasted cool and thin, and it hadn't affected me at all.

Next, Elle wanted to go to a party in the basement of this fraternity house. I owed her a favor, so I came even though I call this place the Inferno because its every party is a pilgrimage into hell.

The basement is a stony cavern lit by red lightbulbs. There were fights. Boys leapfrogged onto each other's backs and started

throwing punches, and one girl caught an elbow in the teeth. The air was hot as an oven, and the cigarette smoke had nowhere to filter off to. Everywhere, people were kissing like they were trying to devour each other.

I remember brooding in that lower hell, holding a beer bottle, and talking to Skip. I'd had a few beers, enough to make me feel sunny and lithe, and I was nowhere near being brutally drunk.

Then come the gaps. There is an interlude between the memory of the basement and the one where I am here, on the ground floor of this suite, sitting on the couch and being kissed by Skip.

And there is another hole, between that and a few blurred moments that I remember sitting on a toilet seat, leaning forward with my chin between my knees. The instant dissolves around the edges. The bathroom is just a small patch of floor and a toilet. My feet are bare. Under them is a pattern that seems like no real pattern at first, as though a contractor tossed tiles into the air and glued them down wherever they landed. Some are square. Some are rectangular. Some are black. Some are white. Then the floor starts to blur, and it looks like a crossword puzzle that no one bothered to fill in. I remember that I couldn't hold my torso upright without it flopping back down like a sheet of cheap poster board.

And sometime after that, I remember standing in the hallway in my underwear, staring at a succession of doors, the way a winner on *The Price Is Right* tries to decide which grand-prize display to crack open. I knew that behind one of them was the million-dollar spectacular: my clothes. I vaguely recall that a boy came along like Bob Barker and told me which one to open.

IF THIS were a movie, this would be the point where I would lean over and ask Skip what happened. He would say, "We just

passed out is all." And then we would both hide our heads under our pillows, and cringe at the close call that nearly spoiled our friendship.

Only this is real life. Skip is not my friend. He is snide and combative, and he makes me feel small. I will not ask him what happened because I do not want to know.

Instead, I collect my clothes as quietly as I can, while Skip sleeps, or pretends to. My socks, pants, and shirt are strewn across the couch like bread crumbs, but they don't lead me any further out of my blackout. I have never felt so lost. I will never find a way to MapQuest myself to this futon. I'll never know how I got here. I'll never know what intersections I crossed along the way.

I decide to hold my shoes in my hands until I make it to the hall, until I'm far enough away to risk the clomping of my cowboy boots. I can't find my bra, so I opt to leave it behind. I hate to think I might be leaving a trophy that Skip can hold up as proof of the conquest, but it is the limb I am willing to bite off to escape the steel-jawed trap.

Outside the bedroom door, it can only be early morning because the whole house is as quiet as a tomb. I confront the same conundrum I must have faced last night: Every stone hallway seems to lead me back to where I started. My legs are shuddering, and I try every possible direction. I go right instead of left. I go up and down different sets of stairs. Yet all routes are circular; they all lead back to Skip's door.

Were I in my right mind, this house with its mural towers, Canterbury windows, and spiral vaults would make me mad as hell. And it will later, when I think about the way these swaggering shitheads live here, insulated as shining knights in a stronghold. But right now, I feel like a drugged rat in a maze

during a clinical trial. I'm so desperate to leave that I am willing to wake Skip just so he'll show me the way.

Later, I won't remember how I roused him from sleep. I won't know whether I climbed the stairs to the loft, or if I called out his name and stayed very far away. I know that I must have averted my eyes because I can't conjure a clear picture of him getting up from the bed. I have no idea what he was wearing, if he had on anything at all. Only the sight of him forcing his feet into unlaced sneakers will stay with me. The laces make little tapping noises as we move across the floor of the pantry, which is the one avenue I didn't try.

When we make it to the garden-side entrance, Skip swings back the door and bleached light courses over him. He is so blond that sunlight mirrors off him, the same way light gets reflected off the three-foot-high mounds of snow on the sides of the street. He wears blue cotton shorts and a white polo shirt. I can't help but wonder what he plans to do after I leave, if he'll go back to bed or sit down with jellied toast and the newspaper's sports section. I can't imagine that any other news could possibly matter.

He stuffs one hand in his shorts' pocket and says, "See you around."

Outside, nature is indifferent. Birds are actually chirping the way they do in Disney movies. I only make it a few steps toward home, before I have to double over to rest. I crouch on the curb, where I can hear Skip close and bolt the storm door behind me.

THERE'S ONLY one thing to do when you're not sure what happened during a blackout, and that's to keep on not being sure. G.I. Joe had it ass-backwards in those public service announcements from the 1980s when, in between commercials for Com-

bos and Robo Strux, he taught us to put reflectors on our bikes and test doorknobs during a fire because "Knowing is half the battle." In terms of denial, it's the opposite: *Not knowing* is half the battle.

Doctors at Duke University say blackouts happen when alcohol totally shuts down the hippocampus, the chunk of the brain's temporal lobe that churns out new memories—the same one that is damaged by Alzheimer's disease and epilepsy. Experts used to think blackouts were an early sign of alcoholism, but today they are finding that mind erasures are common among nonalcoholics, too. Plus, girls needed far fewer Long Island Iced Teas to blow the fuse. On average, girls black out after five drinks. It takes guys nine.

The only upshot of a blackout is that you're spared the emotional effort it takes to repress whatever happened in the midst of it. The night in question forever exists like the train scene in a silent movie, the one where the screen goes dark the instant the train charges the tunnel, and when it emerges a few seconds later with two long whoops of its whistle, the audience never really knows what happened in the tunnel's obscurity. Who made love in the first-class compartment? Who stabbed the man in the club car? You can guess, but you'll never know for sure.

After a blackout, all you have to do is keep on not knowing. If you can't remember, you hope you never remember. You indulge your selective amnesia. You operate under the philosophy *I don't think, therefore I am.*

A FEW THINGS happen before I release the memory of Skip like a captive dove.

For one, I scrutinize my body. This is hard, considering I've never been the kind of girl to bend backward over a handheld

mirror. I have always been too shy, even alone, to give myself the monthly breast exams my doctor always explains with pamphlets. But before I shuffle down the hall to the dorm bathroom to take the symbolic morning-after shower that I've seen in too many movies, I force myself to do a thorough once-over. I pull my hair up off my face. I smell my skin. I check my inner thighs for bruises. Since I've never had sex before, I don't know what signs I am looking for.

The only thing I know with any degree of certainty is that I feel violently ill. My digestive system feels more off-kilter than ever, like organs are writhing and backfiring inside me, and I feel a squeezing stomach pain like someone is standing on my abdomen. I don't know whether it's nerves, or a hangover, or withdrawal from some date-rape drug that makes my heart flutter, but I am so unsteady on my feet that I have to sit on the floor of the bathtub under the shower spray. Between shampoo and conditioner, I bend over the drain to vomit. It's stomach fluids, the acidic yellow froth you spit up when there's nothing else in you.

Next, I avoid my mother, who has been calling as though she's psychic. She has been worried, she says, when she gets me to pick up the phone three days later. No doubt it's because I haven't returned her calls, but in the throes of my remaining paranoia, I'm convinced it's because she knows something that I don't. I think she must have had a premonition about Skip in a dream. Hot tears stream down my face halfway through our talk, and I have to put my hand over the receiver so she won't hear my voice tremble. I pick a fight that makes her hang up before we say our good-byes.

Last, I talk to Elle and get what I can of the details.

I do it while Elle and I sit at a picnic table outside of the uni-

versity's food court. It's our favorite spot for heart-to-hearts and last-minute cramming, where the wind flips the pages of our notebooks and we ingest the eight-inch-tall cups of well-sugared coffee that we count on to fuel us through our hangovers.

Elle is wearing fingerless gloves and a puffy down vest that looks like a life jacket. She is straddling the picnic bench, hunched over notes on something difficult. Elle negates the myth that smart people don't binge drink—she's one of a handful of female physics majors, and the sharpest person I know. Her mind teems with a hundred mathematical theorems that she calls on to explain just about everything.

I am absently staring at the same notes on Ideological State Apparatus that I've had open all day, when I look up and ask her what happened.

I don't know how she answers because I still can't concentrate on anything external. Inside, I feel mental interference that is almost electrical. It is a deep static that is hard to hear over. Still, I hear Elle talk about how she left me at the party, where I was talking to Skip. She didn't want to go without me, but I was like the donkey that resists the force of the reins with its full weight. I threw a tantrum when she wouldn't let go of my arm. I told her, "I'm fine. Just leave. Just leave me the fuck alone." She has no gauge for how drunk I was because she was drunk, too.

Still, when Elle tells me, her face screws up in a look of guilt, and I can tell she's sorry she left. She is averting her eyes, pulling the cotton strings from the holed-out knees of her jeans, and questioning, I'm sure, if she could have done more. No doubt, she is feeling that female-specific remorse that happens when we think we haven't adequately mothered one another. It is the same remorse I felt when I lost Natalie in Ocean City. It's the same remorse my mother will tell me she felt in high school, the night

I was taken to the hospital. I think the world as I know it is a massive web of feminine guilt. We all mourn and make up for not just our own catastrophes, but also everyone else's.

Men don't do this. When men drink, they help each other, but they don't feel personally responsible for one another's catastrophes. Three years from now, when I'm living in New York, three boys I knew in college will crash at my apartment after a night at a nearby bar. One boy will turn up barefoot, and his face will be smeared with street sludge. The other two will let him sleep the entire night on my bathroom floor, without showing the slightest remorse about it. In the morning, when he's scrubbing puke off of his shirt collar, neither of them will tell him, "I shouldn't have let you get that drunk."

Yet my girlfriends and I do this all the time. We play God to one another. We are the omnipresence that won't let our friend Eve reach for that third apple martini.

I tell Elle, "It's fine. I think I'm fine."

It starts to snow, and I don't even bother to pack up my books. I turn my hands over on the table, so I can catch flakes on my inner forearms. I let them dissolve on my skin because I want to feel icy.

Elle says, "Whatever. If you can't remember it, it never really happened, anyway."

SOMEHOW THE word *whatever* has outlasted slacker culture. It is the one artifact that has survived all those movies from the mid-1990s, in which high-school dropouts and college graduates embraced Doc Martens and too much flannel, formed grunge bands with obscene names, went grocery shopping with their parents' gasoline cards, got drunk, got high, slept with their best friends, and challenged the system that would have them believe that do-

ing nothing wasn't something in itself. Over the course of the past fifteen years, *whatever* has become one of those linguistic sneezes that transcends partisans. It is there in almost every facet of American culture, a ready-made column and comic-strip name for every would-be satirist. The word is scrawled under as many pictures in my high school yearbook as *Peace and Love* is in my parents'.

Girls were especially keen on the word from the start. From the moment Alicia Silverstone injected it with a shrill note of sarcasm in *Clueless*, it became immediately obvious that anytime I said something a little off-key, some eighth-grade girl would use her thumbs and index fingers to form a giant *W* to wag in my face, while she rolled her eyes and said "What-ever."

But Elle is right. Saying "whatever" is the best way I know to change the subject. It's a ready-made one-liner, a phrase that is devoid of control, responsibility, or ownership, with the capacity to mean anything, or everything, or nothing at all.

I decide that whatever happened with Skip meant nothing at all.

AT SCHOOL second semester, I assemble a steady team of drinking buddies from the girls I see every night at the campus bars. We are the sorriest girls I know. I am one of the lucky ones—among the girls I slug vodka with on the steps of the school chapel are several victims of rape and abuse and girls who have abusive boyfriends, divorced or dead parents, mothers in rehab and fathers in mental-health facilities. Some have half-siblings they've never met.

Together, we drink until we're batty enough to tick off our disappointments, to cry, and to comfort each other the way girls do. It's like group therapy, only instead of helping me feel less

disturbed, our meetings only push me deeper into depression. They make me more convinced that life as we know it is some kind of purgatory, in which everyone suffers and is punished, and every one of us is licking her wounds. All our talks turn back to suicide—who has tried it, and who has thought about trying it. Everyone knows how and under what circumstances she'd pull the trigger: if she had AIDS, if a sister died, if she were too irretrievably crazy.

By January 2000, I've felt sadness creeping into my daily routine. It's like a dampness, that cold, clammy feeling you get during a hurricane, when moisture seems to permeate your hair, your towels, and your sheets, even though the windows are closed. Some mornings, I wake up and snap immediately into crying. My whole body hurts like a bad joint that aches when it rains.

By winter, even good news makes me cry because I feel it has a swollen underbelly of human truth. Tears start running down my cheeks during class lectures. My eyes water in the laundry room, on the treadmill, and during student-union screenings of slapstick comedies. One night, Tess finds me sobbing during the health segment of the evening news. Scientists have discovered scarred cells from cardiac arrest fall away over time, and she can't understand how sadly hopeful that is. To me, it means that the human heart has the capacity to heal itself.

It's hard to say what is responsible for the change in me. For the most part, I blame Chris, who won't date me, or the fact that my father was laid off. And once in a blue moon, I'll fault Skip. It doesn't occur to me that alcohol might be unhinging me, that drinking at the rate I am can induce depression, impulsive behavior, and symptoms of bipolar and borderline personality disorder. Experts suggest that drinking when you feel low is like

taking speed if you're feeling jumpy: It heightens the ailment instead of remedying it.

There is no reason that that would occur to me. Alcohol is still the one elixir that can remedy my glum moods. And when my blood buzzes on beer or hard liquor, it doesn't feel like a downer. The times that I am drinking are still the few when I don't feel anguish. After a few jiggers of vodka, the heaviness in my chest buoys up, and I feel light, and light-headed.

Elle and I start spending every spare moment together, and we are a match made in Bellevue. Afternoons, we sip coffee over our copies of *The Daily Orange*, smoke Marlboros in the carpeted corridors of Watson Hall, or share a joint in the stairwell at the library. We spend nights at a campus bar ordering shots of "Blood and Sand," or spilling Bombay on her roommate's bedspread while we mix nightcaps.

We are together so often that some of the drunken frat boys at the campus bars start to lean in and ask, "Are you dykes?" And even my mother, in a much less explicit way, asks during our weekly phone calls if I have *something to tell her* about my relationship with Elle. The rumors only get worse when a visiting beer promoter persuades us to peck on the mouth, and posts the picture on a popular college-party Web site.

But, for maybe the first time ever, I don't care what people think. I admire Elle. Her sadness has a great, booming quality. You can feel it approaching before she does, like the glass of water that ripples in *Jurassic Park* before the tyrannosaurus roars onto the screen.

Elle refuses to dress up her hurt for other people's sake. Save for the bars, Elle refuses to get dressed at all. She goes to class with eyes smudged with liner from the night before, wearing

pajama pants and confrontational T-shirts, the type with HELL HATH NO FURY and STILL ILL lettered across the chest. Elle's moods are as gory as surgery shows on TV. Her every torn heartstring is displayed like payback for the world that inflicted the injury.

Some afternoons, Elle and I drink on the quad in plain view. We share a thermos filled with something gamy she mixed up, and swallow the capsules of St. John's Wort I've begun to carry in my book bag. I've been following the directions printed on the side of the bottle, but the six pills I take every day do nothing to cure my feeling of imminent doom.

As we drink, we share headphones. We each have a plastic ear-piece stuffed into one ear; we listen to Elliott Smith's "Everything Means Nothing to Me," and The Beatles' "Yer Blues," and The Smiths' "I Know It's Over" on repeat. Sometimes we fall asleep there, with our heads on our balled-up sweatshirts. CD cases are spread out between us, along with the journals we use to store morbid collections of quotes and the suicide letters we call poetry. I wake up in the dark and the grass, head pounding, when the lampposts switch on outside Machinery Hall.

In many ways, a glass in your hand is an outward expression of pain. It will take me a good number of years to realize it, but drinking is a visible sign to the world that you're hurting, in the same way that starving and cutting are for some girls. In a movie, drinking is one of the best ways for a hero to convey despair without a voice-over. All he really needs to do is walk into a bar, order a shot of tequila, and stare at it resolutely before he slams it back and orders another.

Later, I'll wonder if I hoped someone would catch me during this period. I'll think maybe I wanted someone to notice that I

was always blue, always thirsty for another glass of beer, and ask me who or what broke my heart. I don't want to use the phrase "cry for help" because I don't think I wanted to be rescued. Disaster was still too moving. It was a challenge of psychological and bodily limits that seems risky but not wholly dangerous, like skydiving or bungee jumping, any extreme stunt you have to sign a waiver for.

What I really wanted was empathy. I wanted the company of women—it could only be women—who understood how it feels to be emotionally bombed, blasted, capsized, toppled, clobbered, damaged, dismantled, all the totally destructive adjectives people use in place of *drunk*.

That is exactly what I get from Elle. Together, we are like war veterans. We both feel horrifically wounded.

ELLE AND I start to steal things.

At first, it's nothing big. We'll be rotten drunk at a bar on Marshall Street on the night of a university basketball game, and some local guy with season tickets will grab the seat of Elle's jeans. She'll remark about the wedding band on his hand, and he'll make a move like he's going to hit her. And we'll finally pinch his vintage Zippo or pack of cigarettes, or whatever else he has laid out on the bar, to settle the score.

Sometimes we swipe tips from the bartender who urges girls to donate their panties for free drinks. Other times, we lift cocktail glasses from one bar and drop them at another just because it feels like anarchic disorder. When we bar-crawl, we carry full drinks in our purses so as not to waste them, vodka and fruit juice spilling over our wallets and room keys.

We know no one misses the goods we lift, but scoring them

becomes a type of game. It is a challenge to see just how much we can steal from the men who steal from us: the bar owners who take so much of our money, the beer promoters who come to our campus and try to convince girls to flash them for T-shirts, the guy at the end of the bar who thinks that, because we drink, he can paw us.

And we're not the only ones on campus who take things when we get drunk enough. On campus, almost every dorm room bursts with theft's prizes. Kitchenettes are stocked with soup cans and cracker boxes, food that was lifted from house parties in purses and pockets, when the going was rough. Some boys have whole bottles of booze that they've stolen from bars, ashtrays and pool cues, plus police barricades and traffic cones, things they picked up off the street during the walk home. At the campus bars, there are even people who steal wallets. They linger behind the mass of people ordering drinks, scouting for someone drunk enough to accept help counting their bills. One morning after a vast bender, Elle and I wake up to discover that our cash and credit cards are gone to the dogs.

The contents of fraternity and sorority houses are particularly fluid. Pranks are ongoing. Seemingly as old as the organizations themselves is the members' drive to break in to rival houses and make off with a composite photo, a paddle, a plaque. Between fraternities and sororities the theft is a type of hair-pulling. At Zeta, we keep two ongoing lists: one of the items we have missing, and one of the items we have stolen and intend to return. Our three-digit door code changes weekly, yet the Sigma Taus always crack it. They break in, screeching drunk at two A.M., looking for the plaques we have hidden in the laundry room, and taking a bronze cup off our mantel as quid pro quo when they can't find the goods. Romantically, we never progressed beyond

junior high. Aside from being drunk, being abusive is still one of the only ways we know to communicate interest.

I have my own reasons for wanting to steal from fraternities. It is the year of the fraternity asshole: At Dartmouth College, Zeta Psi is publishing the *Zetemouth*, a fraternity newsletter that chronicles the brothers' sex lives. It prints sexy photos of women the brothers claim they slept with, and categorizes them as "loose," "dirty," "guaranteed hookups," and "sure things." They are releasing the "Manwhore Edition," in which one reporter writes that so-and-so "strikes again," and "she's dirtier than ever . . . if she hooks up with one more Zete, I'm going to need a flowchart just to keep up." Another article promises to deliver "patented date-rape techniques" in a future edition.

After Skip, I've decided that fraternities and the boys in them are hazards. At universities, they are the last booby trap that women have left to dismantle. They are the self-flooding sprinkler system that would drive us violently away. I think fraternities should be dismantled. When you crack open the fraternal system and see it clearly, you realize how outrageous it is, in this day and age, that organizations still exist to protect the interests of white males—namely, drinking and sex.

No structure needs to further these boys' advancement. They have gone as far as the game goes. They have collected all the Monopoly money, and earned the title of all-time champions. Any funds fraternities raise for charitable organizations, all the Habitat for Humanity houses they can build, will not compensate for their utter destructiveness. They take far more than they give. They've had their cake, and eaten ours, too.

I know I sound militant. I don't know whether it's because drinking squashes my inhibitions or boosts my courage, but lately, when I'm drunk, I feel a hostility that I've never known

before. It is a tension deep in my gut that makes me want to yell until my face is red, knock over glasses with the back of my hand, and kick people I don't know in the shins.

It is with that thundering rage that Elle and I start breaking into fraternities to steal things. We feel it's our job to steal back everything that has been confiscated from us. It is an act of revolt against an invincible adversary. We want to rupture the walls of any space that would keep us out. Our assault on a frat house is a hostile takeover: We want to explode it, seize it, smash the framework of the institution, make it true, at last make it ours.

IT IS A Monday night when Zeta's president charges Elle with the task of returning a composite photo to Skip's fraternity.

It is a mistake from the start. In the frame, the brothers look dapper as ever. Every one is accounted for in his navy blazer, white shirt, red-and-blue-striped tie. They are the photos that are taken every spring, when a man from the local Budget Photo makes his rounds with a tripod and a gray muslin backdrop, snapping portraits that make everyone look hungover, so puffy and sallow that a third of us opt not to be photographed.

This one was stolen during a Zeta scavenger hunt, which was someone's sorry excuse for a party. Pledging has gone dry, and the new girls are grumbling that running around campus, gathering trophies, dining-hall forks, and copies of *Playgirl* is no substitute for drinking.

Of course, Elle won't just go knock on the door and hand it back to them; that's not her style. And I won't let her recruit someone else to do it for her because that's not my style. We've been mixing vodka tonics since five, and listening to "Hate and War." In many ways, The Clash is like alcohol: It feels like

something we've stolen from boys. And while we were attempting to harness its power, we fell in love with it. It has seeped into our souls.

The drinks are invigorating. The taste is raw, and the vodka fizzles. And suddenly, the opportunity for reprisal feels just too sweet to pass up. I want to stick it to those guys in their Brooks Brothers ties, by turning their composite photo into conceptual art. I am making dumb jokes about how we should cut the penises out of the *Playgirls* from the scavenger hunt and tape them atop the guys' necks because they are supreme dickheads. And next thing I know, we're actually doing it. We are drinking more and more vodka while we work, until the whole project has a frantic intensity. Time is snowballing from eight o'clock to ten o'clock and beyond, and we are sticking dicks all over the glass until we're out of tape. By the time we're done, the whole piece looks like Brigid Berlin's cock book from the 1960s. On the backside of the frame, we scrawl TO: THE BIGGEST PRICKS WE KNOW in red lipstick, with a drowsy, crooked hand.

We shouldn't deliver it. In our right minds, we never would. But under the armor of hard liquor, we feel unconquerable. So, I find myself cowering behind a pillar on the front porch of the frat I swore I'd never go back to, while Elle steals in through the unlocked door to hang the photo on an empty nail in the foyer.

The second she screams I know they've caught her, and when I inch up to the door to see what's going on, some jock in a dirty ball cap grabs me by the arm and pulls me inside, too.

A couple of boys have trapped Elle in the kitchen. Having peeled off the black sweatshirt she put on earlier for night camouflage, one boy is spraying her with the long hose of the kitchen sink, while another holds her wrists tightly behind her back. Even as she throws her shoulders, she can't worm loose. Another

guy is dancing on the tiles in front of her, as though to provoke her, yelling, "Aww, wet T-shirt contest!" She is kicking her legs wildly at the knees and trying desperately to spit in his face.

The guy who pulled me inside has me in the type of wrestling hold that they never make girls learn in high-school gym class. His elbows are hooked under my armpits, and his palms are pushing hard against the back of my head. I am immobilized and woozy. My chin has been driven to my chest, and it is impossible to focus on anything above my shoelaces. I can't see the brothers who are filtering downstairs as they hear the commotion, but I can hear them. They sound like bellowing whales in my ringing ears.

The pressure on my neck is so great that it drives me to my knees.

It's hard to say what happens next. The hose from the kitchen sink is spraying me hard and cold in the face, and with my hands trapped behind my back, I can't reach up to push the strands of wet hair out of my eyes. I can hear Elle alternating between laughing and screaming. It is the sound that my mother outlawed when my sister and I were young, on the basis that she couldn't tell if we were hurt or playing. Similarly, I can't tell if we're playing. The boys are smiling like the whole thing is a joke as they slap me across the cheeks, tickle my sides, and spank me. And I am feeling the biting frustration that comes from being restrained, from shouting "TIME OUT," and having it fall on deaf male ears.

Whoever has been pushing his thumbs into my elbows finally lets me go. He is a short, red-haired senior in boxer shorts and a tight undershirt that clings around the muscles of his chest. He moves into my line of vision to say, "You're the girl Skip had sex with."

His words are the ipecac that instantly makes me feel like I'm going to be sick. It doesn't mean anything conclusively; I know that boys lie all the time about their exploits. I can still mentally "whatever" it. But it causes me the kind of hurt that makes me want to hurt someone else. I move a little to my left, to a bucket of varnish I've had my eye on. I grab the handle of the brush that's been stewing in it and shove the bristles as deep as I can into the redhead boy's ear.

Someone tosses us our sweatshirts and instructs us to "Get the fuck out." Elle and I put our heads through our sweatshirts as we move for the door. The fabric fuzz of them is wet, we think, with kitchen water. Tomorrow, we will realize that a brother emptied his bladder on them.

IT DOESN'T end there. I am crying, and Elle's telling me, "God-damn it, don't cry."

Instead of going home, we trudge in the rain to a campus bar, where the owner seems pleased to see us. We sit with him in a corner booth and tell him the whole story. He nods and says, "You have to get them back."

It's a slow night. On campus, everyone knows that only people with alcohol problems go out on Monday nights. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, even Sundays are fine. Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays are universal. But there's no getting around the fact that drinking on Monday is desperate. Only a handful of people teeter on bar stools, spinning quarters and lighting cigarettes. The owner gives us free glasses of wine. The table is a clutter of smudged glasses, emptied of everything but ice. I feel myself drifting in and out of consciousness like someone going under ether.

Elle and I will piece together the rest in the morning. We will

be sitting opposite each other on her bed, where I spent the night because I was too down and out to go home, and doing our best to fill in the blanks from the piles of clues that are scattered around us. We cover our mouths with our hands when we realize just how humiliating they are.

We did go back to Skip's fraternity to "get them back," as the bar owner had suggested. Sometime after two A.M., after the bars had closed, we circled the house three times, testing every locked door and latched window. It was during a thunderstorm; because our clothes are still streaked with wet dirt. The light blue sweater I have on has a muddy footprint across the chest.

While we were skulking in the bushes, Elle found an unlocked basement window and dove through it. It was a four-foot drop from there to the floor of the basement, which was the same space where my blackout had happened three months before. Elle stood underneath with her arms spread wide open to catch me.

From there, we proceeded to clean them out. I don't exactly remember snatching books from the bookshelf, and balls from the pool table, and picture frames off the walls. But I know we did because it is all here on Elle's floor in a massive heap. There are plaques and trophies, a stuffed animal, a television remote, an alarm clock, an umbrella stand, kitchen mitts, an oil painting, candlesticks, and *three* 40" x 30" picture frames. It is thousands of dollars' worth of junk, and I have no idea how we could have carried it all between the two points. I ask Elle if she remembers making multiple trips.

It gets worse. When Elle spots a thirty-pack of beer on the floor, we start to remember the rest. Our raid on Skip's fraternity had not satisfied our appetite for destruction, so we crossed the street to Chris's fraternity, where the brothers and their

dates were passed out upstairs after a date party. Elle popped open one of the house's front windows, and we proceeded to wreak havoc there, too, picking up the leftover beer, along with a few more plaques and baubles. We found our way to the basement, where we discovered a can of Benjamin Moore paint, and overturned the whole can onto the floor. We laid in the spill and made snow angels.

Anxiety usually accompanies a hangover. It is just part of the equation: Your stomach turns over, your head beats itself like a drum, your hands jitter, your muscles feel drained, and you feel nervous. But this is a whole other level of panic. There is campus security to worry about, plus Zeta's president. But more than that, we are ashamed of our anger, and what appears to be superhuman strength. It means we are not well-behaved or well-adjusted. Normal women would be more composed, far less seduced by an excess of booze or emotion.

As for the plunder, Elle "borrows" Brianne's car, without asking, and we unload the whole rain-damaged cargo on the fraternity's driveway. We pull down the sun visors to hide our faces as we peel away.

ELLE AND I lay low for the rest of the semester. We stop trying to compete with men when we're drunk because Skip's fraternity has taught us that men are brawnier, that they can hurt us in ways we will never be able to hurt them. Men have the shut out; we will never beat them.

We try to stop getting drunk so much. We try to stop being *so much* in general. We tone down the P.D.E., meaning public displays of emotion. Elle loses herself between the musty stacks in the physics library, in an ongoing chain of extra-credit assignments and study groups, where she and ten men sit bent over

graph paper and calculators, arguing and laughing and jotting things down. My transfer papers go through, and I delve into the required classes for my new journalism major. I spend whole evenings in the school graphics lab, fiddling with newspaper layouts in QuarkXPress, with the clip art and dummy text that refuse to line up.

I also start dating a photography major who fills my blank nights. He is perfectly arrogant, another twig-armed, potty-mouthed meth-head. And after Skip, I am extra afraid to let him touch me.

SPRING COMES again to Syracuse, and it isn't easy. There are girls everywhere, still tan from spring break, sunning their legs on the quad, sipping Chardonnay in the outdoor cafés on Marshall Street (they switch from beer to wine come bathing-suit season). Girls are wearing ridiculous sunglasses with pastel-colored lenses, puckering their lips while they smoke light cigarettes. Painted toenails curl over their sandals. Cleavage heaves out of their sundresses. Everyone is exquisitely happy.

On the other hand, I want to knock them all off, execution-style. I can't help but think about my favorite part in *The Bell Jar*: when Esther Greenwood is sitting around a conference table at a New York fashion magazine with a dozen other nineteen-year-old interns, thinking, *I'm so glad they're going to die*. In fact, I think that image is what makes me start to work on my own exit plans. Not plans to take my own life, but to take a summer internship. It is an almost-desperate measure.

People with substance-abuse issues like to think that changing physical states is the equivalent of changing emotional states. We like to think that removing ourselves from the craziness of the city, the suburbs, the house, the workplace, the cam-

pus, will remove the craziness from us, too. And why wouldn't we? Everywhere we look, instant gratification is alive and well. It is the concept that drives consumerism, manifest destiny, and the American dream. Somewhere inside all of us, particularly women, lies a ruby of hope. It is faith that once we find the right skin product, or piece of real estate, or cocktail, or car, or lipstick or diet, we will, at last, feel good about ourselves. The void will fall away and we will feel complete. We are willing to pay out the ass for it. And I am willing to spend the summer alone in New York, where I expect to find it.

MY PARENTS seem almost happy that I won't be spending the summer at home.

Years from now, they'll admit just how much I ruptured their routine during the summers I stayed home. My mom was working fifteen-hour days, constructing department-store displays. My dad was doing consulting work from home. And my sister, who was obedient then, was earning Girl Scout badges and memorizing vocabulary words at the kitchen table.

When I was home on break, they had to worry about me. At night, they had to listen for the whir of the garage door, a sign that I had made it home safely from a party. Midnight would come and go. So would two A.M. Then five A.M. My father would drive over to the party in his slippers, spot my car still parked in the driveway, and sigh a breath of relief that I hadn't wrapped it around a tree on Route 117, that I'd only passed out and stayed the night. He would scrawl a note on my windshield that said, We were worried, call when you wake up, and drive home.

Summers in a small town are sweet. There is iced tea, and black-eyed Susans. Kids still buy penny candy the way they did some fifty years ago. There are sparklers and group hikes. The

dog pokes at a suspicious toad in the driveway, and deer creep up to the house to rub their heads against the dining-room window. All this is lost on me, so I take an internship at a small trade magazine in New York City.

NEW YORK is the ideal destination for the drunk and the down-trodden.

Even four years from now, after I've worked hard to shake both depression and booze, summers in the city will still make me sad. The urban landscape is a paragon for the one inside. The increased sunlight just distills the grayness. Everything looks bleached out. Inside, lobbies smell like sweat. Outside, garbage is more putrid. Sidewalks marinate in the smell of urine and warm beer.

When I arrive in May 2000, I think it will be the other way around. Clomping down Sixth Avenue on my first day of work, I think, *This is a vast improvement*. Here, in a city of eight million, I think whatever temporary afflictions I am experiencing will feel scaled down. I expect to evanesce in the rush-hour crowds, to feel dwarfed by the tall buildings and tall women, teetering on their four-inch-tall heels.

And if not, I think I will feel commiseration.

New York is like the crisis hot lines that tell potential suicides, "You are never alone." Here, you really aren't ever alone. Everywhere you look, there is someone to remind you they are there. There they are, crossing against a light. And there, catching your hair in the corner of their open umbrella. And there, letting their fluffy, white poodle crap in the middle of the sidewalk. Everywhere you turn, there is someone else to remind you just how miserable they are, too.

I find out quickly that this doesn't help. If anything, it only reminds me how disconnected I am. After a few weeks, I can ride eight stops on the number 6 train with one person's hand on my ass and another person's sour armpit two inches from my face, and still emerge through the sliding glass doors unruffled because I'm troubled by something bigger. Even in Midtown, among the throngs of people that shoulder by me, I feel the thump of loneliness. From the outside, it's hard to imagine life can exist inside the mirrored skyscrapers, when I walk by and all I can see is my own pained little face staring back.

When I feel sad after work, and I usually do, I call Josh, a friend from a summer I spent at Columbia University during high school, who has a summer sublet a few blocks away on Carmine Street. Josh spends his days earning five times the wages that I do, reading biographies about Virginia Woolf for the founding editor at one of New York's top publishing houses, and calling me to say how much I remind him of her (in terms of psychosis, not talent). Together, we drink vodka tonics at cavernous bars in Chinatown and argue through half-open eyes about which one of us is more hopeless.

Plus, I make new drinking buddies. My next-door neighbors in a Washington Square dorm are boys who live there year-round. They are the privileged city boys I've heard rumors about. Half of them are the sons of screen actors, in town for the summer to make up the classes they failed and to hunt for East Village lofts. They never rest from drinking. Their compartment-sized rooms are packed with guitars and amps and turntables, gourmet food they ordered from errand-running services, jugs of wine, bottles of Jim Beam, upside-down Frisbees heaped with cigarette butts. They tell me that I come visit them at four A.M. some morn-

ings, drunk as a skunk after a night out with Josh, to smoke cigarettes, do more shots, and share intimate details about my life. I tell them I don't remember stopping by at all.

At work, I throw up in the bathroom so often that a coworker asks if I'm bulimic. But I'm never the only one who is hungover. At work on Friday mornings there are dozens of people, from assistants to managers, who look haggard after launch parties. They congregate around a dripping coffeepot, smoothing their unwashed hair and cracking jokes about how wasted they got last night. Looking back, it should have been my first indication that excessive drinking doesn't automatically stop after college—you don't just quit relying on alcohol as a mode to connect you to people.

I meet a twenty-three-year-old advertising assistant named Glynn. She is my kind of girl, a former literature major who rents a tenement on Avenue B. We spend a few nights together after work, smoking a joint in her apartment or bar-hopping below Houston, drinking beer at Brownies and nodding along to the chords of a friend-of-a-friend's band.

There are yuppie friends to make, too. The dot.com bubble hasn't burst yet and media layoffs, while always at hand, aren't as frequent and vicious. It is three months after *New York* magazine published a feature about Manhattan's poverty elite: the twentysomething media planners who make \$24,000 in annual salary, but \$100,000 in corporate perks, like cruises on the Forbes yacht and all-expenses-paid ski trips, tickets to the MTV Movie Awards, and all the drinks they can drink. I make friends with two of the male club promoters who are featured in the story, and every weekend they put Josh and me on their parties' guest lists.

The boy I was dating back at S.U. is spending the summer at NYU, too, in one of the one-bedroom apartments on Union Square that the school manages to pack kids into in fours. We go on a few forgettable dates before he stops returning my calls. I can only remember one of them: We went to a Creole restaurant in the Village, where he ordered melon balls, and the owner's cats freely wandered the tables, turning loops through our legs. Even topped on vodka and melon liqueur, I was as mute as a stone, and about that animated.

When the boy stops calling, I quit eating. It seems like the natural thing to do, partly because I've picked up on the fact that I'm ugly, and partly because food turns my stomach, which is already squirming with sadness and nerves. For a month, I eat two bananas and a carton of yogurt per day. Sometimes I'll eat the frozen, low-fat, low-calorie chemicals that pass for ice cream. In a flash, I've lost ten pounds. At work, my pleated skirts slide down off my hips. Josh drags me to dinner on Spring Street, in an attempt to force-feed me. But I ignore my thirty-dollar plate of pasta and suck down red wine by the glass.

I also quit my weekend job and quit going to night class, instead wandering for hours through the East Village, sweating through clothes that are too heavy and black to wear in the summer. One day, I meet a French photographer. I drink cold beer with him at a bar called The Library, follow him down to Pitt Street, and pose for his photos. I lean against door frames with my jeans unbuttoned while he snaps the shutter and calls out, "Look drunk," and I let my face slacken into a look that I know well.

Drinking becomes my full-time summer occupation. I devote increased hours to it. I give it increased effort.

THE WEIGHT I've lost makes up for the tolerance I've gained. Pretty soon I am lying down in the backseat of a cab every time I go out, telling Josh, "I'm going to throw up," while the driver speeds faster down Second Avenue in an effort to get me out quick. Every hungover morning, I am sitting on the ledge of the window overlooking East Fourth Street, smoking a cigarette with the screen up, trying to decide if I'd break my legs or my neck if I jumped.

And I'm not the only one who has these destructive thoughts while I'm wrecked. My phone hums constantly at four in the morning. One of my drinking buddies is always on the other end, stewed to the gills and sobbing hysterically. One says she just dragged a knife too deep across her shin, and she's scared because it won't stop bleeding. Another girl, who is at S.U. for summer sessions, says she just walked over to Lawrinson Hall, the twenty-one-story dorm, for the explicit purpose of jumping off the roof. It seems that alcohol, which has always given us the courage to dance in public or be close to men, is giving us the fearlessness to abuse ourselves, too.

Elle's self-batter is the most terrifying. She calls at ten p.m. one Saturday, to say she is lying in on a hammock in her backyard. She has downed eight beers and ten sleeping pills, and she can't move her legs. Her parents are at a party, and there is no one to check on her, so I make a frantic phone call to the poison control center to find out if ten is a lethal number. A frosty operator tells me, "Anyone who swallows ten of anything needs to go to a hospital." I don't know Elle's address, or the name of her town, so I call the state police and leave her phone number.

Later, Elle will tell me her father was awakened by three cops

who said they were there investigating a drug overdose. His denial was so earnest that, even after it took him twenty minutes to shake Elle awake, he still believed her when she said it was a friend's sick hoax.

I, too, make midnight phone calls. My friends and I call it "drunk dialing" because some nights when you're drunk enough, your phone seems to dial the numbers on its own—especially calling ex-boyfriends with whom your subconscious secretly wants to make contact. One night I drunk-dial my mother, sobbing with an anxiety attack. I tell her I can't breathe, my throat feels as tight as a tourniquet, and the walls of my dorm room are lurching out at me.

It will be the only time of emotional turmoil in which I remember asking her for help, rather than snapping at her defensively and running off like a wounded animal. It is probably a testament to how frightened I am. Lately, charging along the sidewalk in the rain on my way home from work, feet slipping around in my sandals, I feel as unstable as my umbrella—I get the feeling I could be blown inside-out at any second. The wind might break me in half.

My mother must sense it, too, because she books an express flight to LaGuardia the very next weekend.

EVEN THOUGH I know my mom is coming, I'm still surprised by the shrill *eerrrr* of the intercom. It's been three hours since I made it home from my promoter friends' party, a ridiculous affair at which I remember drinking thirteen-dollar drinks called "red devils," and burning a woman with a cigarette while I was trying to convince her to go on a date with Josh. In the VIP room, I'd introduced myself to the man who was on the cover of a recent

Rolling Stone, as though I were someone worthwhile. I'd called home from a pay phone to say I might be hungover when my mom arrives.

Still, the damage is worse than I thought. Through the fog of a hangover, I can see that I am sleeping fully naked, which has been happening a lot lately, when I pass out before I can finish changing for bed. When I knock into the bathroom, there is red-stained vomit all over the sink, the hand towels, the toilet seat. It looks like the scene of a homicide. In the mirror, my face is bloated and yellow. My eyes are half-moons of smeared mascara. My hair is knotted, matted, and sticky with liquor and puke. I try as fast as I can to wet my face and wipe down the bathroom. I hide the dirty clothes, ashtrays, and empty bottles that have been lying in piles on the desks and the beds ever since my roommate moved out.

When I finally take the elevator downstairs to meet my mom, both she and the female security guard cry "Good God" as I round the corner. There is no denying that I am a wreck. But my mother humors me. She makes up the spare double bed with sheets that she brought from home, while I shower. She pages through my stack of *Village Voices* while I run the water in the sink to muffle the sound every time I throw up.

My mother is a creature of habit, content always to stay at home with her tea, her dogs, and her cable TV, and I feel deeply guilty for being fucked-up enough to make her come to New York. Later, the thought of her that day, struggling with my dad's rolling suitcase, stepping out of a cab with no idea whether she was on Washington North or South, wearing the flowing black dress she specifically wore because she heard me say, "Everyone in Manhattan wears black," will always make my eyes well up.

My eyes do well up as I walk her down the street, past the

park. I am describing landmarks in fits and starts, and I trail off every time I try to tell her about Henry James's house, or the chess shops, or the dog that sometimes sits in the fountain and bounces tennis balls off its nose. We sit at an open-air table at The Grey Dog's Coffee, and I drink strong coffee and eat hummus on toast, and then I toss it all up in the toilet of the charming, dried flower-filled bathroom.

As we continue to walk it becomes clear that my system is intensely out of whack. Every few blocks a buzzing noise starts in my ears, and my stomach cramps. I have to tell my mom, "Give me a minute." I say, "I just need a minute to rest here on the steps of the Angelika." Or "against the doorway of Mercer Kitchen." Or "on the curb."

My mom tells me the story about how she once threw up in the bushes the day after a big party in Texas. I know she's trying to make me feel better, but it only makes me feel worse, knowing it was the only time she's ever been hungover, and I feel the same headaches and nausea every weekend.

At a corner grocery my mom buys me the only hangover medication she knows, which is aspirin and bottled water. It doesn't help. I can't keep the water down. I have to stoop over the sidewalk and vomit all the way down West Broadway, in front of all the high-end boutiques my mother and I are too intimidated to go into to browse. She keeps asking if I need to go back to the dorm and rest. And I keep assuring her, after every spit-up, that I feel much better. I tell her, "This was definitely the last time."

When I throw up on the corner of Canal Street, some of it splashes my mom's shoes, and a man walking by shouts out, "Rough night, eh?"

It is too much for her. She shoots her arm up from the shoul-

der to hail a cab, saying, "We *will* go back to the dorm, and you *will* sleep this off."

Back in the dorm, we curl up in identical double beds, pulling down the shades, though the room is still as hot and bright as the August afternoon. I sleep until six o'clock at night, dimly aware of the sound of my mother hanging up my clothes and scrubbing the bathroom with the only cleaning supplies I have: Febreze and toilet paper.

A few times she comes over to stroke my head or put a glass of water on the nightstand. She tends to me like a sick person. Which, it's becoming clear to both of us, I am.

ABUSE