

QUIT LIKE A WOMAN

THE RADICAL CHOICE
TO NOT DRINK
IN A CULTURE
OBSESSED
WITH ALCOHOL

HOLLY
WHITAKER

Quit Like a Woman



RANDOM HOUSE



RANDOM HOUSE

QUIT LIKE A WOMAN

*The Radical Choice to Not Drink in
a Culture Obsessed with Alcohol*

Holly Whitaker

RANDOM HOUSE



THE DIAL PRESS
New York

This is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

Copyright © 2019 by Holly Whitaker

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by The Dial Press, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

THE DIAL PRESS is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Photo credits: page xx: Photo by Albert Harlingue/Roger Viollet/Getty Images; pages xx and xx: Image Courtesy of the Advertising Archives

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Whitaker, Holly, author.

Title: *Quit like a woman : the radical choice to not drink in a culture obsessed with alcohol* / Holly Whitaker.

Description: First edition. | New York : The Dial Press, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019029710 (print) | LCCN 2019029711 (ebook) | ISBN 9781984825056 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781984825063 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women alcoholics—Rehabilitation. | Women drug addicts—Rehabilitation. | Twelve-step programs. | Male domination (Social structure) | Social control.

Classification: LCC HV5278 .W55 2019 (print) | LCC HV5278 (ebook) | DDC 616.86/1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019029710>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019029711>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

For Mom, Heather, Samaria, Elia, Kooks,

Lidgey, Tray, Megan, Em, and Laura.

Blood of my blood.



RANDOM HOUSE



RANDOM HOUSE



*There is nothing stronger than a
broken woman who has rebuilt herself.*

—HANNAH GADSBY



RANDOM HOUSE





RANDOM HOUSE

Contents

Introduction 000

- 1.** The Lie 000
- 2.** Toxic Eyeliner and Goop Cocktails 000
- 3.** Is Alcohol Having a “Cigarette Moment”? 000
- 4.** There Is No Such Thing as an Alcoholic 000
- 5.** The Right Question: Is Alcohol Getting In the Way of My Life? 000
- 6.** AA Was Created for Men 000
- 7.** Quitting Like a Woman 000
- 8.** Working with Our Core Beliefs 000
- 9.** How to Quit Alcohol When You’ve Never Stuck to a Diet 000
- 10.** Breaking the Cycle of Addiction: Rituals and Healthy Coping Mechanisms 000
- 11.** Get at the Root: Learning to Mother Yourself 000
- 12.** Navigating the Sober Illuminati 000
- 13.** Hell Is Other People 000
- 14.** People Who Need People 000
- 15.** What Do You Do for Fun If You Don’t Drink? 000
- 16.** Activism, Sobriety, and the True Resistance 000

Acknowledgments 000

Notes 000



RANDOM HOUSE

Quit Like a Woman

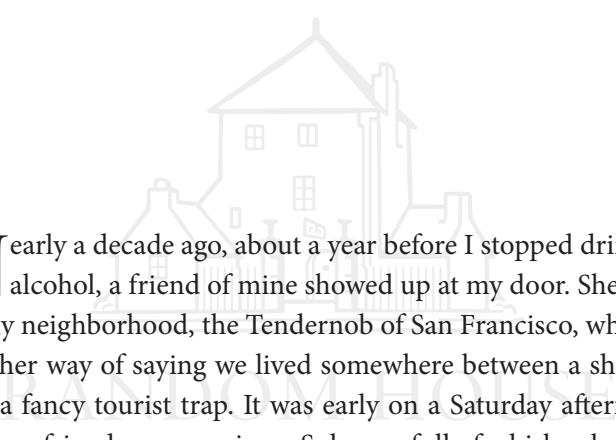


RANDOM HOUSE



RANDOM HOUSE

Introduction



Nearly a decade ago, about a year before I stopped drinking alcohol, a friend of mine showed up at my door. She lived in my neighborhood, the Tendernob of San Francisco, which is another way of saying we lived somewhere between a shithole and a fancy tourist trap. It was early on a Saturday afternoon, and my friend was carrying a Solo cup full of whiskey because some man she'd met on OKCupid had broken her heart. It seemed a reasonable solution to me at the time: to walk around the streets of San Francisco sipping Maker's Mark to dull the specific pain of being rejected by someone she met on the internets who wasn't good enough for her in the first place. Only, I would have chosen Jameson.

We called a few friends to come over, and we sat in my little studio apartment smoking pot and drinking even more whiskey and cheap wine from the corner store, when my dear, broken-hearted friend announced to the group that she was pretty sure she was going through an "alcoholic phase." *Alcoholic phase.* I

looked around the room at the faces of my other friends for a hint of the same reaction I felt, which was relief. I saw not only looks of relief but also ones of deep knowing—we'd all experienced something close enough to that to empathize.

Huh.

When you're terrified that maybe *your* drinking has gone off the rails, nothing will rein in that hysterical, ridiculous thought more tightly than a group of successful, intelligent, attractive, "together" women who normalize your affliction with a new term: *Alcoholic phase!* This scenario is only one of a few hundred examples of why I couldn't figure out whether I really had a problem with alcohol, or if maybe I was just going through a little "thing" that would straighten itself out.

Around the time of this particular incident, when I was thirty-three, my drinking was escalating in a way that felt out of control. It was no longer just one or two at home, or a drunk night out with the girls, or hangovers on the weekends, or any of the shit I'd done in my twenties that felt moderately in control or normal-ish. I was drinking by myself *after* going out; I was hungover more days than not; keeping it to a bottle of wine a night felt like a win; five o'clock stopped coming fast enough, and I started to leave work at 4:45, then 4:30, then 4:00 p.m. At some point, it made sense to carry airline shots in my purse—just in case. Sometimes (especially when working on a deadline) I holed up in my apartment for days on end, drinking from morning until I passed out. That kind of thing.

But (and there is always a *but* when you want to invalidate everything you've just said) I didn't drink every night, and I didn't drink any more than my friends when we went out. I'd recently made it twelve days without booze, and—perhaps most important to me—I had mastered the art of keeping my shit together when drunk in public. I was never the one being car-

ried home, and I was never the one who got sloppy. I made sure of that.

To my mind, there was enough evidence to prove I was a “normal drinker,” and equally enough evidence to qualify me for the Betty Ford. I went back and forth between knowing I needed major help and thinking if I just did more fucking yoga, I’d be fine.

My passage into sobriety was both slow and fast. Slow, in that it took me seventeen years to realize alcohol had never done me any favors, seventeen years of trying to control it and master it and make it work for me like I imagined it worked for all the other people. Fast, in the sense that once I crossed some invisible line, one I still can’t retrace, I was hurtling so quickly toward total dissolution that I couldn’t pretend to have the strength to stave off what was happening to me. The whole thing was like that *Price Is Right* game where the little yodeler is climbing the mountain and you never know when he’s going to stop or how far he’s going to make it, but you also know he has the potential to go all the way.

It might be helpful to mention that during all this time I was simply killing it at work. I’d joined a start-up in 2009, and because I was a cutthroat workaholic with a habit of fucking men in charge, in a few short years I landed a director title—something typically reserved for Ivy League MBAs who favored Ann Taylor pinstripes. It was a health care company, and many of my friends were medical doctors, so I dropped in to see one of them about my “thing.” I explained that I might have a teeny-tiny drinking issue and a habit of throwing up most things I ate, and when she had to google how to treat me and suggested Alcoholics Anonymous, I knew I was completely fucked. I bought wine on the way home from that appointment, because I wasn’t an alcoholic and there was no way in hell I was going to AA.

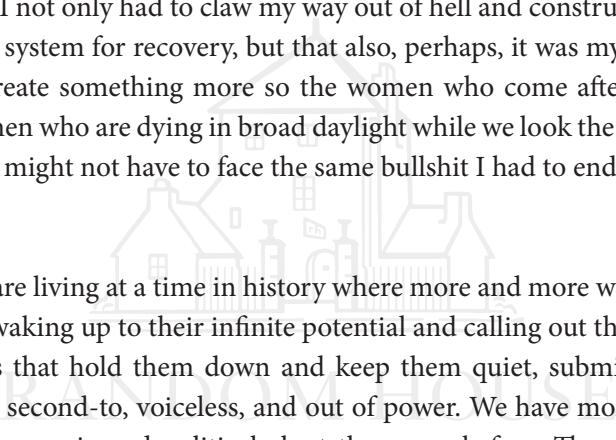
But over the course of the next eighteen months, one by one, I stopped drinking, smoking pot, taking all recreational drugs, and I got over my bulimia. I started meditating and crawled out of the depths of depression, addiction, sickness, and crushing debt. Within twenty months of that afternoon with my friends—drinking room-temperature whiskey and pondering if maybe all of us are sick or none of us are—I also quit my job. I did this because I had finally become someone who (a) wasn't the kind of woman who reports to someone she's been sleeping with, and (b) had a pure reason to exist: I knew I was supposed to start a revolution around alcohol, addiction, and recovery.

What I didn't quite know was exactly how I would do that, or that this revolution would become stronger with the strands of activism and energy woven into other major social forces: fourth-wave and intersectional feminism, the reaction to the Trump election, the legalization of marijuana in several states, the Black Lives Matter movement, the opioid crisis, and the growing and vocalized dissent against a very racist, classist, imperialist—and failed—War on Drugs.

This journey has been an evolving one. At first, it was the story of a dead woman walking, of all the women in this world who try to conform to a life they are told they should want—one that looks good on paper. I drank green juice and I made the right sounds when I fucked men I didn't really like, and I crushed it in the boardroom and traveled to Central America all by myself, and my ass was yoga tight. I did all the right things until all the right things became so suffocating I wound up prostrate, drunk, on the floor of my apartment. It then became the journey of a woman waking up to the world and all its possibilities and wonder, her own power and voice and unique identity, the bigness that a life can be when we center it on our true desires, compared to the smallness of the one we accept

when we center it on the desires we're supposed to have.

That personal awakening was followed by the part where I discovered that alcohol was not only something I could not abide, but perhaps something we *all* shouldn't, and that was paralleled by the part where I discovered that the systems in place to help me stop drinking the chemical we've been trained to tolerate—the chemical that was physically and emotionally and mentally murdering me—were archaic, patriarchal, masculine, and hence ineffective for me as a non-man. I discovered that I not only had to claw my way out of hell and construct my own system for recovery, but that also, perhaps, it was my duty to create something more so the women who come after me, women who are dying in broad daylight while we look the other way, might not have to face the same bullshit I had to endure.



We are living at a time in history where more and more women are waking up to their infinite potential and calling out the systems that hold them down and keep them quiet, submissive, sick, second-to, voiceless, and out of power. We have more socioeconomic and political clout than ever before. The movements started by women of color, the LGBTQIA community, and radical feminists have gained considerable momentum, and we've reached a tipping point—more of us are aware of the terms of our own oppression and of our complicity in the oppression of others. Words like *misogyny*, *patriarchy*, *tone-policing*, *white privilege*, and *gaslighting* have become common lexicon; women, now more than any other time in history, are woke to our collective subjugation.

And yet.

And yet: This is also the time in which women are drinking more than we ever have before. Between 2002 and 2012, the

rates of alcohol addiction among women rose by 84 percent—as in, it nearly *doubled*. One in ten adult American women will die an alcohol-related death, and from 2007 to 2017, alcohol-related deaths among women rose 67 percent, as opposed to 29 percent among men. It is a time of radical progression in almost every area of our collective experience—and a time of unprecedented rates of addiction coupled with an almost gross ambivalence toward our personal and societal relationship with alcohol. Here is the time in history where *The Future Is Female*, the wine is pink, the yoga classes serve beer, and the death toll rises. Here is the time in history where masses of us women fill the streets to protest against external oppression, then celebrate or cope or come down from it all with a glass of self-administered oppression.

This book is about all these things—about the sickness in our society that drives us toward an unattainable perfection and lives we never bargained for and what we do to manage that impossible situation. It's about an addictive chemical that we have been fooled into believing is the answer to every problem, a healthful staple of our diet, our key to connection and power. It's about a system that limits our ability to question whether we should be consuming that addictive chemical and one that, when we do become addicted, forces us into male-centric “recovery” frameworks (i.e., *Alcoholics Anonymous*) that not only run counter to our emerging feminist and individualist ideals *but actively work against them*, boarding us through yet another system that requires submission to male authority, self-silencing, further dissolution of self, and pathologized femininity.

In other words, this book is about what makes us sick and keeps us sick. It's about our power as women—both as individuals and as a collective—and how alcohol can keep us from it. And most important, it is about what is possible when we re-

move alcohol from our lives and destroy our belief systems around it. This is the truth about alcohol, and the thing about truth is once you know it, you can never un-know it.

You will never look at drinking the same way again.





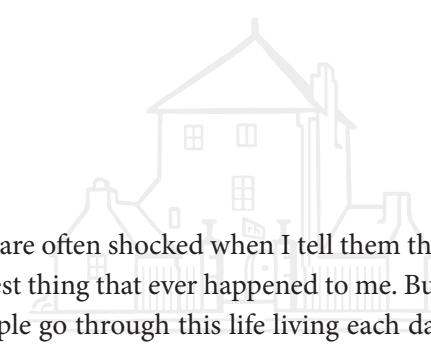
RANDOM HOUSE

1

The Lie

Addiction begins with the hope that something “out there” can instantly fill up the emptiness inside.

—JEAN KILBOURNE



People are often shocked when I tell them that addiction was the best thing that ever happened to me. But it's true, it was. Most people go through this life living each day not much different from the next. We are born impressionless, doughy little babies into a world that carves its fear and love of conformity into us. We are told to pick the safe path, to get a job that pays well, to marry a man who provides, become a woman who provides, save our money, buy property, procreate, and die with as few wrinkles as humanly possible. We are sold the lie that if we do the things that keep us safe, we will be okay. As if it were a proven formula: 401(k) = safety = happiness.

When I was fourteen years old, my parents divorced. My mom was born with congenital hip dysplasia, and by the time I graduated junior high she'd already had both her hips replaced. (As of this writing, she's had eight hip replacements.) She'd been a stay-at-home mom for my entire childhood, and with my parents' divorce came economic uncertainty—she had to go back

to both work and school. She never said it to me directly, but I knew enough to understand that we were barely making it and that our new circumstances wore her health down and her hips out. I hated the fragility of our situation, I hated the idea that we were poor, I hated how much money ruled our lives. But mostly I hated that when my mom felt pain in her hips, my first thought wasn't whether she was okay. No, my first thought was always: *I wonder if she'll have to stop working. I wonder if we'll run out of money.*

If there was one thing I wasn't going to be when I grew up, it was poor.

When I was thirteen, my family had Thanksgiving at my cousin Sarah's in Pasadena. Sarah is twenty-five years older than me, and she'd just gotten her CPA, married an oil executive, and bought a four-bedroom Spanish-style house in a neighborhood that bordered San Marino (the *best* schools). She drove a Volvo and made dinners that rivaled Martha Stewart's and was the kind of woman that kept truffles in the pantry. She bought me my first Starbucks on that trip, and I remember wanting to be her when I grew up, and her exactly. Or Amanda Woodward from *Melrose Place*. Either would do because both had everything I was supposed to have.

Not long after that Thanksgiving, my parents' marriage started to fall apart, or rather, my dad's closeted gayness outgrew the walk-in. I imagine that in his desperation to not have to come out and in my mom's desperation to not know he had anything to come out with, they thought a series of weekend getaways to reasonably priced motels on the central coast of California might do the trick. It was the summer before my freshman year of high school, and their Hail Mary attempt to save their marriage meant weekends of my sixteen-year-old sister and my thirteen-year-old self alone in our house. The first

time I got drunk was during one of these weekends, and while I don't recognize myself in the stories that recovered alcoholics tell of the first sip being the answer to every prayer they ever had, I do remember trying to drink as fast as I possibly could. I wasn't hungry to feel something different; if anything, I was hungry to be someone different. Or: maybe I was just hungry to be bad.

My parents' divorce was finalized in 1994, and my dad told me he was gay around the end of my freshman year. If high school was anything, it was the letting of air out of the balloon that was my potential. I entered with a 4.0 and an eye on Stanford, and when I left I was at the height of my anorexia, a daily pot smoker, weekend partier, and giver of many blow jobs. I barely graduated, and I settled on a coastal community college that promised a social life over a future.

One Saturday night during my freshman year of college, drunk and high on meth (but let's say cocaine because that sounds way better), I was walking with my best friend's boyfriend in between parties in San Luis Obispo, and we kissed each other. I'll spare you the details, but I will tell you about the part that matters, which is how he was judged innocent by our circle of friends, and how I was judged a scheming whore. I was cut off at the knees from everything I cared about, everyone I cared about, and whatever minute fraction of self-esteem I might have had before the incident. I left town with a deficit of self-worth that was the size of me, and for the next five years I took it upon myself to warn whatever new friends I made about what I'd done, like some sex offender moving into a new neighborhood. Maybe it seems like a trivial affair, but it destroyed parts of me and made me into a woman who assumed eventually everyone would leave, or possibly turn on me, if I wasn't important enough.

Not long after that kiss, I moved back in with my mom, cleaned up my grades, and cleaned up my life. If worth wasn't something I could get socially (and try as I might, I could not), it was something I could get through success. I got into UC Santa Cruz, and at the age of twenty-three, I graduated with a degree in business management economics. Upon graduation—while most of my friends organized tree sits or went to grad school or kept the same minimum wage jobs we'd had throughout college because the tech bubble had burst and the Twin Towers had collapsed and we were at war—I secured a job at a Big Four accounting firm in Silicon Valley that started me at \$52,000 a year. When I got that offer letter, I remember thinking: *This will show them all.*

Because this is a book about drinking, this is the part where I'm supposed to explain the way alcohol showed up in my life, to paint you a picture of a woman who was destined to drink in the morning. But the thing is, my drinking wasn't notable, or specific, or linear, and I didn't ever really think in terms of alcohol the way, say, Caroline Knapp did in her memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*. It was *never* a love story. The story was always about my not-enoughness and my black-sheepness and my total inability to not feel like an empty piece of inconsequential shit who couldn't do life. Alcohol was just part of the story of me, and it shape-shifted as I shape-shifted. There's enough of a story to convince you how entirely normal my drinking was, and there's enough of a story to foreshadow a problem.

In those dark years of high school where I forgot how to eat and study for tests, drinking wasn't what *I* did—I didn't have some sort of precious relationship with it—it was what *we* did. We drank in fields after football games and at house parties

when our parents were out of town, and we took turns being the one who slept on the bathroom floor, and we spent Mondays rehashing the weekend's debauchery. And the most significant thing I can tell you about it was that I liked that it afforded me status, that it helped me to fit in and get finger-banged by soccer players, and also that I really hated it for how much it already seemed to have taken from me. It didn't feel like outlying behavior; it felt exactly like being in high school. Or: Maybe it will help to know that in certain circles and by certain parents, I was often thought of as a slut and a bad influence and a party girl, the kind of girl who might show up on a *Girls Gone Wild* clip. Maybe it will help you trace it to the beginning if I tell you that when I stopped eating food, I also learned how to drink an entire six-pack without puking.

In my first few years of college, where I learned how to eat again but also how to make myself throw up and where I got my first Fs and sluttied it up with my bestie's man, drinking was still not something that *I* did but something *we* did. We drank on the weekends and sometimes during the week, and our weekends were spent piecing together the nights before and eating takeout from Gus's to cure our hangovers. It felt like extremely normal, clichéd college behavior. Or: Maybe it will help if I tell you that I ended up in the hospital for alcohol poisoning, and that I wrecked my car while under the influence not once but four times. Maybe it will help you piece it together if I tell you: This one time I was so drunk, it took me ten minutes to realize I was being sexually assaulted, and I do remember thinking that if I was ever murdered or kidnapped, people would probably have a hard time speaking about what a loss it was, or have much more to say about me than "she partied and smoked a lot of pot and loved Kenny from *South Park*."

In the years following my slut-shaming for that kiss, some-

thing shifted. I didn't want to be the kind of girl who drove her car through fences and fucked men who wore hemp chokers to Dave Matthews concerts. I didn't want to worry about how my eulogy might read, and I absolutely didn't want to end up living with my mom through my early twenties because I *failed out of community college*. I wanted what thirteen-year-old me wanted, which was money, security, status, purity, normalcy, a home with a white picket fence. Only now the home wasn't really a home so much as it was a high-rise flat in San Francisco because I'd watched *Pirates of Silicon Valley* starring Noah Wyle and decided that Amanda Woodward wasn't a high enough aim anymore—I wanted to be more like Steve Jobs.

Because I changed so much in those four years, so did my drinking. By the time I graduated college, I had also graduated to a woman who could keep the same bottle of wine or the same six-pack of beer in her fridge for a week if she wanted to, and a woman who properly kept her binge drinking to girls' weekends, bachelorette parties, and work-sponsored happy hours. I also lived in California, and because my young adult life was surrounded by wine country, my young adult drinking was shaped by it, too. I'd been doing winery tours since I'd gotten my first fake ID, I had books on wine and enology and had friends who worked at vineyards and owned vineyards and friends who curated their own wine cellars, and somewhere along the way, wine got all tangled into my conception of what "making it" looked like. If you went to a restaurant and ordered a bottle of Jordan Cab it said something about you; if you knew how to buy a bottle of wine for your table it said something about you; if you could tell the difference between, say, a Syrah and a Shiraz, it said something about you. Which is to say: In my early twenties I was wine-obsessed, and not in the way where I drank a lot of wine (which I did), but more in the way where I absolutely

dominated wine. It was a status symbol, something I curated like I did my taste in indie music, or my moderately priced collection of stiletto heels. And yet, the most notable thing about my drinking in my early-to-mid-twenties was that it was entirely *unnotable*. I drank and got drunk. I was an asshole about wine. The same could be said about basically all of my friends.

In those early postcollege years, I took to my job like a fish to water. I didn't particularly like what I did for a living, but I did like having business cards that said Deloitte & Touche and saying I knew how to do important things, like build accretion schedules. Besides, it didn't matter if I liked my job, or if it really made me happy, because all that mattered was that it would afford me the money to buy a life that would make me happy.

Except, it didn't really happen like that. The more I worked and excelled, the more I hated what I did, how it consumed me, and how it never ended. I didn't know how to turn off or how to be less than perfect or how to not want to be better than every single person I worked with. I felt as if I had stepped onto a hamster wheel directly out of school, a life with a never-ending to-do list, credit card debt that followed me from college and somehow outpaced my raises, an inability to feel like anything was ever enough. I started out not being able to keep up with what I was supposed to be, and that feeling never really went away, no matter how great my title sounded or how much money I made. At some point, I could no longer keep a bottle of wine in my fridge for a week, or quite remember how I had once ended a day without a drink.

My work and my career trajectory were suffocating and inescapable, and they simultaneously became my escape. Work became the only place in the world where I knew how to be the

worthy, together version of myself, and so work became the central force in my life. At parties in my twenties, I only knew how to ask people what they did for a living and wait for them to ask me the same. My job title and my size-twenty-five waist were the only two things I valued, because they were the only two things that had any value as social currency. I could work hard, I could starve myself, and didn't everyone want to be the girl who could pull those things off? I found that two glasses of wine—and sometimes three and sometimes the whole bottle—helped me pull those things off.

In 2009, while the rest of the world was getting pink-slipped in the aftermath of the housing bubble, I took a job at a health care start-up. I'd moved to San Francisco two years earlier, and while I drank most nights because that's what young professionals in San Francisco did, my drinking still wasn't what I'd call notable, though it was worrisome, as in I worried about how I couldn't quite keep my wine fridge stocked. Taking that job with its endless hours and promotions and potential meant somehow I gave even more of myself to my career and lost even more of my actual life. When I broke up with the man who was supposed to be my One, I stole all the wine from our his kitchen, which was a metaphor for how I traded my last shot at marriage and children for Russian River Pinots. I started going to bed with my laptop and wine instead of him, and my drinking finally became what I would call *notable*. I gave up on trying to be anything other than successful at work and impossibly thin, and alcohol was how I managed to both go to bed at night and get out of it in the morning. Alcohol was also how I didn't eat.

In 2011 I was promoted to director at work.

In 2011 almost every night ended with two bottles of wine.

In 2011, while my friends were buying homes and having children and my One Who Got Away went and got engaged, I

was drunk-buying monogrammed sheets to replace the wine-stained monogrammed sheets I had drunk-bought as the feeblest attempt to establish some sense of having it together.

Professionally, I was everything I was supposed to be. Personally, I was a train wreck who had to borrow money from my fixed-income mother to float myself between paychecks from my six-figure job because I had entirely lost my ability to pull off life.

On a trip to Costa Rica and Panama in 2012, nine months after that promotion, three months before my first attempt at sobriety, and nine months before I finally quit, I couldn't stop thinking about how I could stay there and marry a local. One night at a wine bar in Bocas del Toro, I interrogated a young blond woman from Texas who'd come to the island in her twenties. She lived in a beach shack and had a bunch of kids and a husband, and I told my traveling companion that I wanted her life.

And I did. I wanted the fuck out, and as far as I knew then, I had three potential paths: I could find some archipelago situation like wine bar woman, I could join the Peace Corps, or I could marry rich. Only I didn't find love in Central America, the Peace Corps didn't pay off six-figure credit card debt (because I checked and that's what they told me), and the rich man I'd settled on fucked one of my friends.

The point is, I built the life *they* told me I should build (*they* being, in the words of bell hooks, the "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy," which I didn't have words for at the time, so let's just say every piece of media and advertising I'd consumed since I'd grown ears and eyes), and all I could do was plot to escape that life.

It never occurred to me that I could just stop, that I could step off the hamster wheel, that I could walk away at any time,

that I could stop running so furiously and desperately toward a future I prayed would save me. What occurred to me was that I was unlike normal people, those people who seemed to be able to do what I couldn't, which was not make messes of everything they touched. If I'd had a prayer at that time (which I didn't because no God would possibly construct the fuckery that was my life), it would have been *Why can't I be like everyone else?*

And: It wasn't as if I wasn't trying to make it, or be healthier, or live like everyone else seemed to be living. I'd been doing yoga for a decade. I ate kale before kale was Kale. I'd done the Master Cleanse and all the other cleanses. I was vegetarian. I'd been to Esalen (where Don Draper goes to find himself on the season finale of *Mad Men* and cries in a circle with rich white people who alternately wear business suits and caftans). I owned lots of Thich Nhat Hanh books. I had a debt counselor and a gym membership, and I ran along the water three or four days a week, and most weekends I would construct impossible schedules of the coming week where I'd finally nail life. I had it in my mind that if I just ate cleaner, worked out more, drank less, smoked less, lost more weight, made more money, saved more money, stopped spilling my bed wine on those monogrammed sheets—if I could just get more discipline or be more perfect—then it would all work out. It would all snap into place, and I would snap into place.

The harder I tried to be more perfect—the more cleanses I did, books I bought, and budgets I made, the more things I bought to cover up and paint over the mess that was my life—the harder it became to keep together. The attempts to fix me only added more chaos, the chaos added more pain, and so I added more wine. And pot. And cigarettes. And food. And clothes. I was a monster who couldn't stop consuming things I thought would make me the human I was supposed to be.

Until one morning, just three months after my trip to Costa Rica, it all broke. Or rather, I broke. I woke up in my rent-controlled San Francisco apartment to the aftermath of one of my binges, one of my failed attempts at escape. My bed had no sheets. My mattress was stained with food and wine and puke. My computer was still on, so was the TV, and bags of trash and half-eaten food cartons and empty beer bottles were strewn about my apartment. My throat ached of bulimia and hangover, and I was still drunk; a pint of Jameson was in my hand. It wasn't the first time I'd woken up to this scene, but it was the first time I couldn't make myself pretend that I was okay and that this was normal thirty-something shit I'd grow out of.

Here is where I fell prostrate on the floor and asked God for help.

Here is where I stopped running.

Here is where I made eye contact with myself in the mirror again.

Here is where I finally heard the part of me that I'd tried to quiet with career and clothes and status and food and drink and drugs; the part of me that was screaming she couldn't settle for this bullshit for one more minute.

There is the life that most of us live, and then there is the life we have buried deep inside us, the life we know we're supposed to be living. Up until that moment on the floor of my apartment, the life I was supposed to be living eluded me; it eluded me so hard that it broke me into a thousand million pieces that I kept barely stitched together with Paige jeans, whiskey neat, and a really good title at work. But somehow in that moment on the floor, the jig was up. I could no longer keep it up and keep it together. Staring at the detritus in my living room that day in October, it finally occurred to me that I had no other choice but to actually start risking everything I'd settled for in order to

have the life I had buried inside me, the one that wanted to run to an island, the one that had dreams of actual happiness, the one I'm writing from today. The life I'd attempted and forced from all angles except the one that required me to look at myself in the mirror and ask the girl staring back who she was and what *she* wanted from this life.

The girl staring back did not fuck around. She knew the booze had to go first.

