

Still Life with Bottle
For James (2019)

In graduate school, we'd drink the Spanish Rioja, then put a red candle in the empty bottle as we drank the next. Hunched over the kitchen table in the basement apartment, we watched the red wax slide down the green curves, pool on the cloth and cool. We talked and talked, about Hemingway in Paris and Absurdist painters and ethnomusicology, what we'd read or wanted to read. I'd never had such conversations, never felt the world so full of meaning and possibility.

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The first bottle I ever found was one my mother hid at the bottom of the laundry basket in the upstairs bathroom. Sitting on the toilet, princess pajamas around my ankles, I saw the sun glint off something hard and green through the pink plastic weave. I dug to the bottom and pulled out a square bottle. The gold and green label said Passport Scotch. No alarms went off in my ten-year-old mind, no panic, no premonition that this was the beginning of a long line of bottles that would bloom in the strangest places – the toilet tank, linen closet, drawers, bookshelves. No idea that in two years we would comb the house monthly to harvest them all. That in three years she'd be admitted to her first rehab. That five years after the rehab she'd be hospitalized for debilitating cirrhosis and alcohol-induced jaundice. That seven years after the hospital, we'd walk through a frozen graveyard just before Christmas and bury her next to her father.

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It's a Polaroid picture. The color blurs a little in the corner where someone pulled up the paper too soon. You sit in the green recliner in the apartment you shared with your wife and son before it all came undone. Celeste must have taken the picture. Thomas stands between you and the side table. He wears a little sweater vest; he's two. That recliner will be the one piece of furniture you take with you.

It's just a couple of months before your divorce. We've been seeing each other for over a year, but miraculously the foundations of our lives haven't yet collapsed. That's coming. Your marriage, my engagement, that's ending. That's the blur in the corner. That's the Jamison bottle on the side table.

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Thomas went to his first AA meeting with you when he was three years old. You brought coloring books, matchbox cars, a juice box, set him up in the corner and told him to play quietly while you went and sat in the circle of folding chairs.

The meeting began. The leader asked, "Is there anyone who is here for the first time?" Thomas came to the edge of the circle and raised his hand.

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Hemingway characters drink absinthe, of course. Fitzgerald's drink everything.

Carrie Bradshaw starts the Cosmo craze. *Sex in the City*. The glass and the woman shallow and daring, legs dangling from a bar stool.

Don Draper, *Mad Men*, orders the Old Fashioned. Bitters and Bourbon.

The Dude likes White Russians.

The most iconic. Bond. Vodka Martini, shaken, not stirred.

I drank ouzo in the back of a Greek restaurant in London once, after the place had closed. Maybe twenty people, English, Spanish, French, Greek, swirling through the room. A handsome man with a dark beard and a filter-less cigarette poured blue and green liquors whose names I didn't understand, whose bottles I'd never seen and couldn't read. Twenty years old, I felt like a character in a novel or movie -- romantic, mysterious, urbane.

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Forced sterilization, shock treatment, lobotomy. Before AA, before anyone knew it was a disease, that was the "treatment." Even in the 1980's, doctors forced my mother to take Antabuse, a drug designed to keep her from drinking by making her so sick if she drank that she would never drink again. Poison.

The doctor warned her sternly and brought her the pills on a tray with a Dixie cup of tepid water. She swallowed it all down and got dressed, bought a bottle of Scotch on her way home. She was hospitalized that afternoon.

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My first year in college, a party night, my best friend comes in to find me injecting melon balls with grain alcohol from a syringe her premed boyfriend scoured up. "Oh," she says, "so it's going to be that kind of night!"

My second year in college, on a road trip to visit someone's cousin at the University of Florida, I go to a dive bar in Gainesville – all stained oak paneling, with a cloud of cigarette smoke around each light. The beer comes in plastic pitchers and we drink it out of red cups. Our feet stick to the linoleum floor. Almost drunk, just on the line between sharp and slurring, I run the pool table for the first time in my life. The whole bar laughs and applauds. I feel perfect, beautiful.

My third year in college, I decide that if I limit myself to drinking only white wine, if I set the glass down a little further away from me each time I sip it, I will not become my mother.

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You never asked me to stop drinking.

One month sober, you put a book in my hands, *Under the Influence*. I remember reading it in the library in Wilmington, watching the car lights move north on I-95 like blood in a vein. I remember understanding the word "genetic" in a way I never had before: a trap set to spring, a cocked rifle.

I haven't had a drink in thirty years.

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Thomas gets out of the car and walks toward us across the cold parking lot. He has no coat and his jeans are torn. "There's daddy, Nana," our grandson says from his car seat.

I feel you shift, feel you see what I see. Thomas moves like his limbs are lead, like he's moving through water. He looks older than thirty-one, looks off, wrong – skin fevered, eyes hard and cold, smile too wide, a neon advertisement with letters missing.

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Funny things you say when strangers offer you a drink:

"I'm allergic to alcohol. I break out in handcuffs."

"I drank my whole share already."

"The world's a safer place if I don't drink."

"I'm not going out on wine coolers. It's going to be Jamison's and a revolver."

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I grew up listening to the ceilings, picturing where everyone in the house was and what they were doing at all times. I thought that was normal. I thought it was normal to laugh about the worst things, to say mom was “smurfed” instead of drunk, to make fun of how she fell into the toilet. To use humor to encyst anything that could cause pain. I thought everyone woke up in the middle of the night already crying, woke from nightmares screaming.

It wasn't until years after my mother died, a summer day on our back porch that I started to realize. You were reading *Achilles in Vietnam* out loud to me. Jonathan Shay talked about the startle reflex and how after trauma, soldiers would suddenly startle sitting in a room alone.

“I do that all the time,” I said. “Don't you? Doesn't everyone?”

You looked at me with such kindness. “No.”

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At sixteen, Thomas cut school one Tuesday. His grades were plummeting. The principal suspended him. We drove the eight hours to Massachusetts to Celeste's house and the three of us confronted him in the kitchen. Celeste's second husband -- who was also an alcoholic but hadn't stopped drinking -- a man Thomas hated, was noticeably missing.

“Where did you go?” you asked.

Thomas leaned his chair away from the table as far as he could. The back of his head pushing a framed “Bless This House” embroidery askew on the wall. “Nowhere!” he said. “Nowhere! I was there. They just didn't see me. I stayed in the music room all day and no one noticed me.”

“Thomas,” Celeste said, “You're 6' 4”! No one noticed you?”

You said, “There are three reasons to cut school: sex, drugs, and booze. Which one was it? Or was it all three together?”

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In Cezanne's painting, *Still Life with Bottle and Apple Basket*, the brush strokes tempt touching. Everything's moving, dense with color and horizontal texture. The apples, still spilling out of the basket, look like they might be rolling toward the precarious edge of the table. Everything's tilted. The madeleines about to topple off the plate, the cloth sliding out of the frame.

The green bottle in the background leans toward the basket and the viewer, dark, reflective. In its surface, if you look hard enough, you might see the face of the painter staring at the still life, concentrating.

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When I first started teaching at the university, a colleague, someone I barely knew, told students I was a drunk. He said he'd seen me falling off barstools at Smitty McGees, said I had vodka in my water bottle when I taught.

Why? Why? I couldn't begin to fathom it. What had I done? I hadn't had a drink in years. Did he see someone who looked like me at the bar? Was it mistaken identity? Was it spite? Why would he lie to our students?

What I felt: anger, of course, and righteous indignation. But underneath that? Shame, such shame. As though he were right, as though he saw some reflection deep in me, knew somehow everything I believed I could have been, everything I believed I still could be if I ever drank again.

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I hate the movie *Leaving Las Vegas*. Nicolas Cage, the terminal alcoholic falling for Elisabeth Shue, the beautiful prostitute with the heart of gold and all her own teeth, a woman who promises never to tell him to stop drinking. Who stays with him to the bittersweet end. His hands shake, but he can still get it up. His hair's a mess, but he's handsome still, still Nicolas Cage.

He's not so bloated he can barely walk. His skin and the whites of his eyes haven't turned orange because his liver and kidneys are shutting down. He's not covered with bruises from vitamin deficiency. He's got enough energy for the DT's, enough brain for articulate despair. Such romantic bullshit.

Jesus Christ, he's got years and years of the bitterest hell left in him. And when he finally dies . . . but who wants to see that movie?

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My mother and I went to funerals, an Irish thing I guess, obligatory. We followed hearses through intricate iron gates to Holy Angels or Saint Anne's, climbed out of our Ford, walked to the