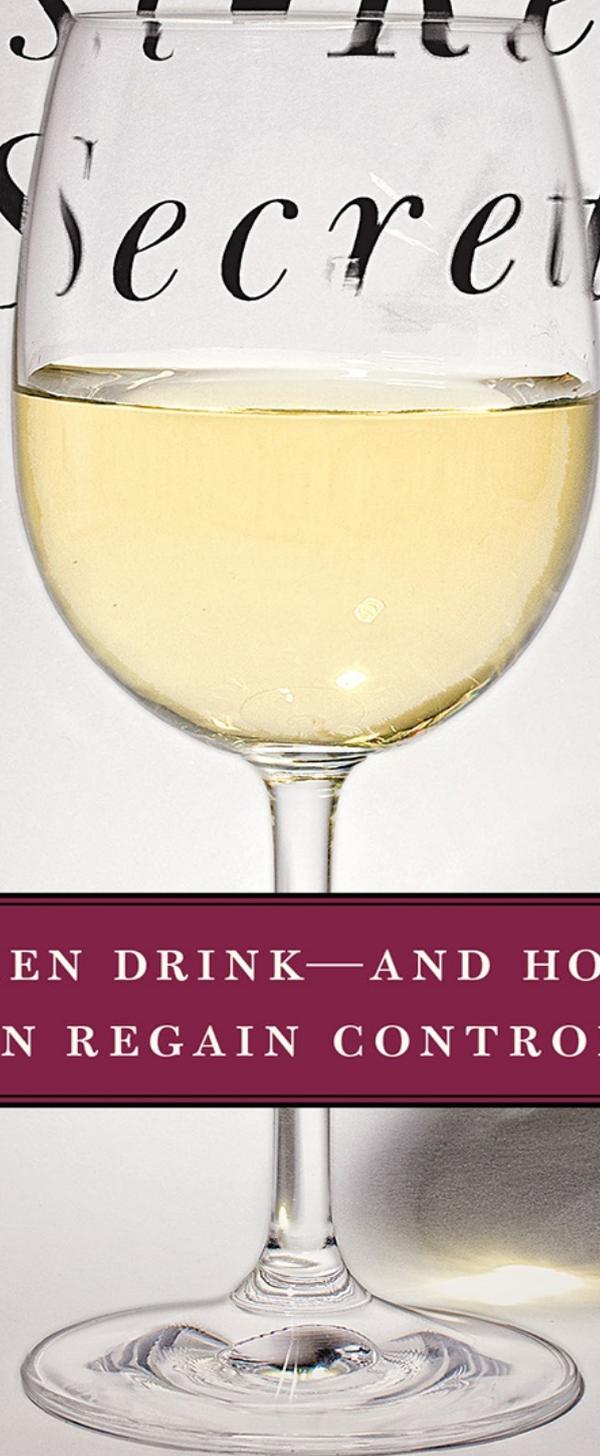


“Glaser has written an engaging account of women and drink, citing . . . evidence that some problem drinkers can learn moderation. . . . Bound to stir controversy.” —*People*

*Her
Best-Kept
Secret*



WHY WOMEN DRINK—AND HOW THEY
CAN REGAIN CONTROL

G A B R I E L L E G L A S E R

Praise for *Her Best-Kept Secret*

“Glaser makes a persuasive case that A.A., which enjoys a monopoly in nearly every recovery sphere, is structurally and functionally unsuited to many women.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Glaser has written an engaging account of women and drink, citing fascinating studies about modern stressors . . . and evidence that some problem drinkers can learn moderation. . . . Bound to stir controversy.”

—*People*

“Glaser approaches [her topic] with investigative rigor and thoughtful analysis.”

—*Boston Globe*

“Did you ever consider that [a girlfriend] might be standing at the edge of a liquor cliff? If you didn’t, *Her Best-Kept Secret: Why Women Drink—And How They Can Regain Control* is bound to make you reconsider.”

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“In a heartfelt and tender examination of the issue, [Glaser] looks not just at the problems unique to women, but at the ways in which methods of recovery may be tailored to the fairer sex to maximize their effectiveness.”

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“[I]nsightful and provocative . . . this quick read is full of encouraging and informative advice, and it’s sure to ignite renewed discussion about one-size-fits-all treatment options.”

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“An important addition to feminist literature that calls upon women to reject a spurious equality ‘whose consequences in broken families, broken hearts, and broken futures are all too real’ and face up to the problem of alcohol dependency before it takes over their lives.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“With humor, thoughtfulness, and skillful research, Glaser paints a picture of mature female drinking today. You’ll see yourself or your friends on almost every page.”

—[Parents.com](#)

“A well-researched look into the differences between how men and women drink, what their motivations are for drinking, and how they should cope with drinking problems.”

“That so many American women stand at the edge of a liquid cliff is a surprising and scary problem that Gabrielle Glaser illuminates powerfully. For those who have a loved one standing there, you will find hope here.”

—Sheryl WuDunn, Pulitzer Prize-winning coauthor of the national bestseller *Half the Sky*

“*Her Best-Kept Secret* reveals the existence of an epidemic with profound implications for women and their loved ones. This compassionate yet authoritative book explains why millions of ordinary women are turning to alcohol to handle the strains of daily life—and what they can do about it.”

—Hilda Hutcherson, MD, bestselling author of *What Your Mother Never Told You About S-e-x*

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*Her
Best-Kept
Secret*

WHY WOMEN DRINK—AND HOW THEY
CAN REGAIN CONTROL

GABRIELLE GLASER

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*In memory of Nana and Poppy, wholly immoderate in courage, affection,
and fun*

Prologue

My name is Gabrielle, and I'm not an alcoholic.

In the field of women who write about alcohol, that makes me unusual. Much of the memorable writing on this subject comes from women who have suffered from their abuse of alcohol—with broken marriages, ugly custody battles, and repeated DUIs. These addiction chronicles trace the now-familiar path from debauchery to redemption with lively anecdotes about waking up in the beds of men whose names the author can't or doesn't want to remember.

This is not one of those books.

I'm a journalist who has written about the overlapping universes of women, health, and culture for two decades. A few years ago, I started noticing signs that women were drinking more—a lot more. I saw it in the consumption of young women who seemed determined to keep up with the boys and continued on through the stumbles of early adulthood. Women well into the responsible years of family and career were boozing it up—my friends; my neighbors; even, on occasion, me.

As I began to explore the overlapping universes of women and alcohol, I wanted to understand what I was noticing all around me: from glossy ads to my own refrigerator; from social networking to television. I have lived in a lot of places, moving from the East to the West and back again, and the trend was evident wherever I looked.

When my oldest daughter entered kindergarten in the mid-1990s, wine wasn't a part of obligatory school functions in the New York suburbs where I lived with my family. But a few years later, when my second daughter entered school, a couple of mothers joked about bringing their flasks to Pasta Night. *Flasks?* I wondered, at the time. Wasn't that, like, from *Gunsmoke*?

In 2001, I had a third child, and even without looking hard I could see that something had significantly shifted. It was a few months after 9/11, and loving friends dropped off dinner, flowers, and baby clothes. Everybody seemed happy for a break in the terrible news. (Nine people in my small town had been killed in the towers.) But several women—editors, advertising executives, marketing consultants—delivered unusual presents. I got wine—lots of it—in binary wine carriers that reminded me of double strollers. “You'll be needing this!” was the general message. Two people told me: “One for you, one to share.” It was an anxious time, but even so it struck me as odd. Why would I drink a bottle of wine by myself? I was nursing, for God's sake. I chalked it up to my surroundings,

where, in the middle of memorial services and anthrax scares, stress was at a peak. If you weren't drinking at that time, you had to have a pretty damn good excuse. Still, wine as a baby gift?

In 2002, my husband and I got jobs at a newspaper in Oregon, where I have roots stretching back 150 years. Almost as soon as we were settled in Portland, I noticed women even in that relaxed city bending their elbows with the same enthusiasm as stressed-out New Yorkers. It was against company rules to drink on the job, but women I interviewed routinely paired their lunches with beers and wine flights. After work, I occasionally joined some female colleagues who met at a cozy wood-paneled bar across the street. They were regulars, and the bartenders usually had their drinks poured the minute they took off their coats. I always left after one glass of wine—my kids were young, and I wanted to get home to make dinner. My coworkers stayed, usually for another couple of rounds, then drove home on the rainy roads. It wasn't as if I was sipping herbal tea at night myself: I usually had a small juice glass of wine while I was cooking, and another small one during dinner. But evenings at the bar used to make me a little worried. Those women sort of . . . tied one on. What if someone got into an accident, and I hadn't said anything?

I realized that it wasn't just the pressure of meeting deadlines. Women drank if they worked; women drank if they didn't work. They even drank at the parent meetings for the laid-back environmental middle school. There was no need for flasks there—half the time, gatherings were in wine bars.

Women drank in my sister's elegant suburb, before dinner, during dinner, instead of dinner. They drank just as much in my hipster neighborhood on the other side of the river, too. One Sunday night as I was doing the dishes, I saw a woman with an ancient yellow Lab pause on the parking strip outside next to the recycling bin, out for the next morning's pickup. She glanced around furtively, then shifted her backpack around to her chest. She slid first one giant empty green bottle into the plastic box, and then another. She did this as noiselessly as one might move a sleeping baby from the car seat to the crib, so as not to disturb. At first I thought maybe she had just forgotten to take out her own bin, but those big merlot bottles were there every Monday morning for the next six years.

It became clear that this wasn't just in New York and Portland. My survey was decidedly unscientific, but wide ranging. Women drank in Seattle, they drank in Chicago, they drank in San Francisco. They just . . . drank.



As I began to think about this book, I realized that drink was more of a subtext in my own life than I had understood. As a child, it was a thrill for me to stride into rural Oregon bars and pool halls with my granddad, a handsome French Canadian with deep-set blue eyes, the nose of a hawk, and smooth broad cheekbones that looked like they'd been chiseled from marble. Poppy managed a jukebox and pinball-machine operation his brother-in-law owned, and when we

would walk into a place—nobody cared much about minors not being allowed—people sat up and took notice. The bars made me feel like I was visiting Jeannie in her bottle. The wall, incandescent with green gin, topaz whiskey, and gleaming vodka, looked to me like a library of giant jewels. The cocktail waitresses always gave me Shirley Temples loaded with maraschino cherries, plastic monkeys dangling from the side of the tall glass.

Poppy had come to the United States as a teenager, in the midst of Prohibition, and his knowledge of the Canadian border's back roads came in handy during that long dry spell. Only after he died did I understand what he had meant when he joked that he had been in the "thirst" business.

My parents weren't teetotalers, but they were hardly big tipplers, either. Drinks were for special occasions: my dad liked Black Russians, but only in restaurants, and once on vacation my mom ordered a Blue Hawaii. When I was in high school in the early 1980s, somebody would pass around a bottle of MD 20/20, or draw a crowd with a case of contraband Rainier someone had begged an older brother to buy. The beer was invariably warm, and invariably bad, and I could never understand what the fuss was about.

In college, I got really drunk a single time, on a bottle of Cracklin' Rose. It was the fall of 1982, and as freshmen we envisioned the need for some sort of terrific mass relief after our first set of midterms. We organized an evening with a purpose, something we called The Get Drunk and Fall Down Party. I finished most of my bottle and spent many hours that night trying to calm my spinning bed. I was eighteen and stupid, but I learned a fast lesson. For two years after, I worked hard and rarely drank.

But then I went to study in France. The girls who lived across the hall in my squat concrete dorm always kept their door open, Gallic insouciance on constant display. They sat cross-legged on the floor and smoked cigarettes, tapping away at their typewriters and occasionally pouring Bordeaux from the collection of half-drunk bottles on their desks. The boys had brown bottles of Kronenbourg 1664 in a small refrigerator in the hallway, and the students shared drinks like American students stuck their hands in bowls of air-popped popcorn. Not once did I hear the slurred squawks and boozy bellows so common on my campus six thousand miles away.

On weekends, I lived with a couple outside Paris who were friends of my parents. Guy, my host, made a delightful show of presenting his wife, Arlette, and me with beautiful pink Kirs, and he was even more theatrical about the wine he had chosen to accompany the meal. Usually we drank a bottle among the three of us; sometimes more. We did the same thing at Paris restaurants on Saturdays. They were never drunk, and neither was I. Moderation is easy if that's what everyone does.

Ever since, I have enjoyed wine most nights in pretty much the same way, except when I've been sick or pregnant. My husband and I drink wine with dinner, finish perhaps two-thirds of the bottle, and put it away for the next night. In the summer, or when we have guests, sometimes we drink cocktails.

But a few years ago, I began to notice distressing articles—“Moderate Drinking Poses Breast Cancer Risk”—or questionnaires in women’s magazines asking “Are you an alcoholic?” No matter how low my score, I still felt the slightest bit unsettled: Was there something I was missing? Did I like drinking too much, look forward to it too much, enjoy what felt like a wintergreen Certs coat my veins about a half hour after I’d had my small glass? Did liking it mean I had some sort of a problem? Nonsense, I’d think: I don’t get drunk, I never black out, I’ve never dreamed of hiding my consumption. And besides, the French and the Italians drink much, much more, more regularly, and they’re not alcoholics. But wait, said the news crawl of worries that advances through my brain daily. What if they are? The logical counterargument responds: Don’t be such a prig! Moderate drinkers outlive everybody, and even heavy drinkers outlive teetotalers. I almost never have more than two of those little glasses a night.

Except a few years ago, when I was leaving my job and extended family in Oregon. I was trying to find a house in suburban New Jersey over the Internet, sell one I’d hoped never to leave, and had frequent long-distance quarrels with my husband, who was commuting between Portland and his great new job in New York. My parents were sad. My sister and I snapped at each other. My teenagers were angry and tense; my youngest daughter, then six, was bewildered. Whenever I stopped to see my parents-in-law, who had moved from Boston to a retirement community near us, I felt an anvil of guilt.

And that is how, during a rainy Pacific Northwest winter, I found myself anticipating my nightly wine.

On my last day of work, I made sure I waited to cry until I got to my car with a box of my belongings: yellowed clippings, a vase, my photographs. I followed the Willamette River eastward, finally sobbing as I crossed my favorite red bridge. Mount Hood glowed pink in the eastern sky. I drove past my quirky gym, which was also a video store that carried independent films; past a guy on a unicycle; past the tapas bar we could walk to; past the giant old-growth fir trees. I could feel a headache, the kind I get from crying, crawling up my skull.

Until that moment, drinking to steady my nerves hadn’t really ever occurred to me—and certainly not when I was by myself. I might feel a little looser after drinking, but I always stopped. I despised the sensation of losing control.

That night (and several that followed), I found myself hating it a lot less than usual. Here is what I told myself: I knew the small juice glasses I used for wine held five ounces, because long ago I measured them, just like the posters on the back of my doctor’s door advised. So that one-third of a bottle isn’t actually your “one glass.” My glasses were what American guidelines consider a “serving,” and I never filled it to the top—only sots would do such a thing. So my ordinary two glasses weren’t even two servings. Besides, I was supposed to drink a glass of red wine every night. My dad’s cardiologist told me so himself, as my dad recovered from triple-bypass surgery. Okay, so I preferred white. It had to have some helpful effect, too.

I got home, pulled open the refrigerator, and opened my favorite wine, a sauvignon blanc from New Zealand. The girls were watching TV and didn't have much interest in talking to me anyway. I started cooking and dialed my husband in New York. I poured, drank, poured some more. The girls and I ate dinner, during which I poured some more. We cleaned up. I eyed the bottle on the counter, alarmed. It was two-thirds gone. And five days later, I realized I had polished off two other bottles. Alone.

One afternoon, after leaving my house several times so that unexpected prospective buyers might roam it freely, my heartbeat felt like a car alarm. I was on deadline with a freelance magazine piece, but the day was spent. I looked anxiously at the clock. It was 4:45, too early to drink. I took the dog for a walk, and suddenly felt my face flush hot. What was I thinking? What about wine at five o'clock would make that day better? What was it about wine—too much of it, at least—that was making anything better?

So to test myself, I stopped for a couple of weeks. No drinking, no buying. In the grape-producing western states, the vegetable-museum supermarkets have aisles of wine, stacked high, with helpful aproned stewards there to pluck out just the right bottle to go with your salmon, your roast chicken, your barbecued lamb. Proud winery representatives stand behind makeshift bars with tiny plastic tasting cups, inquiring if you'd like to try some. *Why, thank you, I would.* Safeway gives out free cloth wine totes whenever you buy six bottles. You can even buy wine at the gas station, not that you would. But you could. It's everywhere. I hadn't even noticed—until I looked.

I passed my little test, but I also gained an understanding. I saw how easily, how swiftly, how imperceptibly you could slip into a habit. Since then, I keep a strict internal log: no more than two drinks on any night, a few nights a week with none. I can't say I feel better, or notice even the slightest difference on the nights I don't drink—or the mornings after.

Even so, this usually bumps my tally to more than seven drinks a week (though not by much), and by U.S. standards that makes me a "heavy drinker." This strikes me as odd, since the government guidelines for "safe" female drinking in Australia, Denmark, Canada, Holland, and New Zealand roughly double that of the United States. In the wine-producing countries of Italy, France, and Spain, recommendations for moderate daily limits are even higher.

In August 2008, just as the economy was tanking, my family and I moved to New Jersey. Everything looked pretty bleak, and again I noticed women joking about how much they were imbibing. When I stopped at a liquor store for some Spanish wine to pair with paella one hot day, my eye was drawn to the opposite side of the store, where women in microscopic miniskirts presided over a display of dry ice. They were promoting a new drink called "Sparkling Nuvo," a clear pink concoction made of vodka, sparkling white wine, and passion fruit juice. "It's like vodka and champagne!" said a young woman as she stroked her long hair. I was decidedly not the demographic they were after, and no one noticed when I took a whiff of the viscous stuff. It looked and smelled like Benadryl.

As I glanced down the rows of booze past the women, though, I recognized that I had missed a dramatic cultural shift. In the years I'd been in Oregon, I hadn't set foot in a liquor store because my alcohol of choice—wine—is sold on every corner there. In New Jersey, it's usually only available in specialty outlets. And much of the merchandise I saw was perched in what could only be described as the Lady Aisle. I wandered past complete mysteries: watermelon-flavored vodka, vanilla-flavored vodka (wouldn't that just be called vanilla?), even pink tequila. There were odd foil pouches of premixed cocktails that boasted how they took the "guesswork" out of mixing drinks. Capri Sun for moms!

The week I saw the Sparkling Nuvo, I made a trip to my town's recycling depot. We had finally finished unpacking, and I wanted to get rid of the boxes I had shoved into the backseat of my car. Once I found the place, behind a high chain-link fence, I noticed a long line of luxury metallic SUVs with female drivers. One after the other, they parked next to the truck for metal and glass and jumped out of their seats. Like the merlot drinker in Portland, these women had a singular mission: to deposit their shameful proof and leave as quickly as possible. Expert multitaskers, these women did not speak on their iPhones—the violent crash of the bottles, crunching into the iron maws of the trucks, would have been a dead giveaway. Their arms, ropey from years of yoga or miles on the elliptical trainer—"Best shape of her life!"—reached for the bags that are the totems of upper-middle-class life: silver ones from Nordstrom, white ones from Williams-Sonoma, plain ones from Whole Foods. Out poured the bottles, the bottles, the bottles. The bottles they intend to start just sipping from, but end up finishing before their husbands get home.

"Here every week," said John, who mans the depot on Wednesdays. He folded his three middle fingers into his palm, and extended his pinkie and his thumb. He cocked his head back and pointed his thumb toward his open mouth, as if it were the neck of a bottle. He smiled, and shook his head.

On a sunny July Sunday in 2009, a thirty-six-year-old Long Island mother named Diane Schuler killed her daughter, her three nieces, herself, and three men in an oncoming car when she careened the wrong way up a New York highway.

At first, sympathy swirled around Schuler, who reminded women of themselves. She had juggled a marriage, two kids, and a job—in her case, as an executive at Cablevision. The Taconic Parkway, the road where she crashed, is notorious for accidents, and initial reports focused on the possibility that a medical condition had disoriented her. But when the toxicology report from her mangled body revealed that she had a blood alcohol level at twice the legal limit, as well as trace THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, compassion turned to contempt. "How Could She?" demanded the *New York Post*. Her widower insisted, even years later, that his wife couldn't have had a secret drinking problem—despite the fact that ten shots of vodka were in her bloodstream at death. "She was a great mother," he has said.

Great mothers, of course, can't have hidden drinking problems.

Women who drink face more scrutiny than men. But the most vitriol is reserved for mothers who drink too much.

Several weeks after the Taconic tragedy, news of a second accident, also caused by a drunken mother, blared across New York tabloids. This time, a Bronx woman, blitzed on cognac, flipped her carful of girls while speeding on the Henry Hudson Parkway. Eleven-year-old Leandra Rosado, a friend of her daughter's, died after she was thrown from the car, and outrage about the incident was so palpable that New York legislators swiftly made driving while drunk with a child in the car a felony. In the nine months that followed, police made 514 arrests under the new law. And while 63 percent of drunken drivers were men, it was the women who stirred the most outrage—and the most news coverage.

A handful of mug shots of the men appeared in local and metropolitan papers, but inebriated women invariably warranted bigger headlines: “Boozed-Up Mom Charged” and “Drunk Mom Behind Wheel.” Online commenters dished predictable invective: “Disgusting excuse for a mother!” “Feed her to the wolves!” “Poor white trash!” They have been shamed, then forgotten. Written off. Barflies.

There is another realm of women drinkers—those who fear they drink too much but haven't yet suffered serious consequences. They don't intend to cross that line, but sometimes there are scary signs: drunken e-mails, wholly forgotten until morning; angry words blurted when the salve of wine morphs into a serum for ugly truths.

Online, in posts to perfect lady-strangers, the women confess. They unburden themselves to other worried drinkers who find that their own jobs and cooking and homework and college applications and clothes left in the dryer—for the love of *God*, can't somebody, anybody, please match the *socks* in this house?—are all a little easier to cope with after they pour themselves a nice glass of chardonnay, or zinfandel, but probably chardonnay. They have the sneaking suspicion that the one glass that slid into two and then three and, oh, what the hell, now four, is a bad sign.

They try many things. They try not buying alcohol. They try drinking only on weekends. They try drinking pomegranate juice with seltzer. They try putting ginger tea over ice. They try sucking Jolly Ranchers. They pick up the cigarettes they last smoked in college. They love, love, love the days they wake up clearheaded. They read at night, they watch TV at night, they are sometimes more, sometimes less, interested in sex. But then something happens: a snide comment at work; the check for camp that goes missing in the backpack vortex; a nasty driver in the supermarket parking lot. A trigger, one of the many that drip, drip, drip like water seeping from a leaky roof, and the cork comes off. The glass gets poured. Down the hatch.

But let's be clear: The trigger is usually quite simple. It is evening itself.

The worry festers. Do I have a problem? Am I some sort of lush?



Today's excess imbibing is only the latest sharp swing in America's complex relationship with alcohol. I wondered how, exactly, did our cultural icons go from the saloon destroyer Carry Nation to the Cosmopolitan-sipping Carrie Bradshaw in just a couple of generations? How had we gotten from abstinence crusades to *Girls Gone Wild* and, for women a few years older, furtive trips to the dump?

Over the two and a half years I spent talking to women for this book, I found only a few who were willing to reveal themselves. Some cited the writer Stefanie Wilder-Taylor, who had created an identity for herself as a drinking mom in such books as *Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay*. In 2009, though, Wilder-Taylor, the mother of three young daughters, announced on her blog that she drank too much and needed some help stopping. She cofounded an online group for women struggling with alcohol, the Booze-Free Brigade, that has grown to fifteen hundred members.

Yet because female excess drinking is a shame to be hidden at all costs, the drinking stays hidden, revealing itself at jewelry parties where Heather or Denise stay a little too close to the wine, a little too far away from the earrings. In today's confessional world, where even e-vites seem to demand elaborate explanations for why guests can't make it to a birthday party, the women worry. In my small town, the wine store owners, like hairdressers, hear everything. One told me that she has a customer who always asks for the store's fancy gift bags, as if somehow sheathing the same bottles of cheap pinot grigio she buys will help repackage the truth. Another woman comes in once a week to get several liters of inexpensive cabernet—"for cooking," she says, as she races to the back of the store, then plunks down exact change. "Must be making a lot of coq au vin," the store owner says.

American women afflicted with some form of embarrassing excess or painful deficiency have a lot of modern help. If you have an "overactive bladder," there are a handful of drugs about which you may "ask your doctor," and if you're depressed, you might take anything from Abilify to Zoloft. There are whole industries of fat-busters: appetite suppressants, fat-absorption inhibitors, experimental doses of human growth hormone. You can buy special prepackaged diets; memberships in Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and gyms. You can announce that you are "off carbs," without so much as raising an eyebrow. You can get liposuction; you can get lap band surgery or a gastric bypass. Since two out of three Americans are overweight, the subject is open game. When Oprah wheeled a wagon carrying sixty-seven pounds of fat onto her set in 1988, she launched a national conversation.

But rare is the woman who can openly declare that she's having trouble cutting back on booze. In this book, I distinguish between proven fact and conjecture, what is national habit, what is solid science, and what is rooted in our attitude toward alcohol. I also take a hard look at our country's traditional remedy for drinking problems, Alcoholics Anonymous, and how an increasing number of women are questioning its effectiveness and safety. Why are women drinking

more than in previous eras, and what does it mean? Alcohol is a socially acceptable, legal way to muscle through the postfeminist, breadwinning, or stay-at-home life women lead. It's a drug women can respectably use in public and in private, even if it carries with it the risk of taking them under. It pops up in the headlines when a suburban mom kills seven others, including the kids she loves, but that's a gory headline. The real story is a silent, utterly bourgeois, and hiding-in-plain sight problem: How a lot of American women are hanging right over a cliff.

1 *Lush*

Solid statistics on women's drinking habits are hard to come by. In part, that's because all measures of potentially illicit behavior—sex, drugs, alcohol—are subject to the inherent inaccuracies of self-reporting. (“How many drinks a week?” “I don't know, Doc—maybe three or four.”) There's also the historic indifference of the mostly male research community to focusing on gender differences in the science of disease. In recent years, however, a critical mass of credible studies have emerged that quantify the anecdotal evidence I had glimpsed in Portland and New York.

The findings are incontrovertible. By every quantitative measure, women are drinking more. They're being charged more often with drunk driving, they're more frequently measured with high concentrations of alcohol in their bloodstreams at the scene of car accidents, and they're more often treated in emergency rooms for being dangerously intoxicated. In the past decade, record numbers of women have sought treatment for alcohol abuse. And, in perhaps the most undeniable statistic of all, they are the consumers whose purchases are fueling steady growth in the sales of wine. Meanwhile, men's drinking, arrests for drunk driving, and alcohol purchases are flat, or even falling.

Contrary to the impression fostered by reality shows and *Gossip Girl*, young women alone are not responsible for these statistics. There are plenty of girls going wild on the nation's college campuses, but there is an even more striking trend of women in their thirties, forties, and fifties who are getting through their days of work, and nights with teething toddlers, trying teenagers, or sick parents, by hitting the bottle.

The risky habits of young women are well documented in articles, graphic memoirs, and cautionary TV specials. But their stories are more than just sad tales, or the school nurse's hyperbole: They are a serious public health concern. A national analysis of hospitalizations for alcohol overdose found that the rate of young females age eighteen to twenty-four jumped 50 percent between 1999 and 2008. In the same period, the rate for young men rose only 8 percent. The most alarming statistic was the sharp rise in the number of young women who turned up at hospitals having OD'd on both drugs and alcohol: That number more than doubled. Among young men, it stayed the same.

These data are part of a broader cultural shift in which drinking by women is seen as a proud rite of passage—or, at least, nothing to hide. I once shared a train ride with a loquacious college student who told me she was “practicing drinking” in advance of her planned spring break in Mexico. “It was my mom’s idea, after I got sick over Christmas break from mixing rum with beer,” she explained. “She doesn’t want me making a fool of myself in Cabo, so we’re working on getting my tolerance up.”

Nothing like a little mother-daughter bonding—especially when gals with hollow legs get such respect. In 2011, students at Rutgers University chose *Jersey Shore*’s Snooki as a guest speaker on campus. The reality TV star—whose on-camera antics included blackout falls, an arrest for drunken and disorderly conduct, and the admission that she had often gotten so intoxicated she had woken up in garbage cans—was paid thirty-two thousand dollars for her talk. That was two thousand dollars more than writer Toni Morrison received for giving the school’s commencement address six weeks later. Who needs guidance from a Nobel Prize winner when you can get advice like Snooki’s? “Study hard,” she told the crowd, “but party harder.”

Middle-aged women aren’t pounding shots or slurping tequila out of each other’s belly buttons, but they, too, are drinking more than at any time in recent history. Their habits are different from those of their younger sisters. Their beverage of choice, after all, is wine, and their venue is less likely to be public.

In fact, the middle-class female predilection for wine seems like it’s just a jolly hobby for time-stretched mothers. There are T-shirts with a spilled wineglass and the shorthand plea, “Not so loud, I had book club last night.” Nearly 650,000 women follow “Moms Who Need Wine” on Facebook, and another 131,000 women are fans of the group called “OMG, I So Need a Glass of Wine or I’m Gonna Sell My Kids.” And the wine-swilling mom pops up as a cultural trope, from the highbrow to the mass market. In Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, Patty Berglund shuffles out for the morning papers every day with the “Chardonnay Splotch,” the ruddy face of heavy drinkers. Nic, the driven doctor played by Annette Bening in *The Kids Are All Right*, downs her red wine a little too eagerly for her partner’s taste. “You know what, Jules? I like my wine! Okay? So fucking sue me!” In the film *Smashed*, Kate, the fresh-faced first-grade teacher, wets her bed, throws up in front of her students, and drunkenly steals wine from a convenience store before she sobers up and leaves her drinking-buddy husband. Courteney Cox’s *Cougar Town* character pours her daily red wine into giant vessels she calls Big Joe, Big Carl, and Big Lou. When Big Joe breaks, she holds a memorial service for its shards, tearfully recalling, “He was always there for me when I needed him.” And drinking wine is so linked to the women of *Real Housewives* shows that three of the women it made famous—Bethenny Frankel, Ramona Singer, and Teresa Giudice—introduced their own brands.

In 2010, Gallup pollsters reported that nearly two-thirds of all American women drank regularly, a higher percentage than any other time in twenty-five years. Like many other studies around the world, Gallup found that drinking

habits correlated directly with socioeconomic status. The more educated and well off a woman is, the more likely she is to imbibe. Catholics, atheists, agnostics, and those who identified themselves as non-Christians were also far more likely to drink than churchgoing Protestants.

White women are more likely to drink than women of other racial backgrounds, but that is changing, too. An analysis of the drinking habits of eighty-five thousand Americans between the early 1990s and the early 2000s found that the percentage of women who classified themselves as regular drinkers rose across the board. The number of white women drinkers increased 24 percent; Hispanics, 33 percent; and black women, 42 percent. (American Indian women were not included in this study. Because of the isolation of many Native American communities and the devastating role alcohol often plays in them, researchers typically study tribal alcohol use separately. Asian women were also not included; of all ethnic groups, they drink the least, perhaps because of a genetic intolerance that creates an uncomfortable flushing of the face and chest.)

Women are the wine industry's most enthusiastic customers. Despite the recession (or perhaps because of it), wine consumption in the U.S. continued to grow between the years 2009 and 2012, according to wine industry analysts.

Not all that wine is being decorously sipped. In 2012, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a study that found 13 percent of American women binge drink regularly, about half the rate of men. Researchers define binge drinking as more than four drinks in two hours for women, and five drinks in two hours for men. We often hear about binge-drinking youths, but adult women aren't far behind: The CDC found that while more college-age women binge drink, the frequency of binge drinking among women ages forty-five and older is about the same as it is for younger females, about once a week. The average number of drinks downed per binge is six.

No surprise, then, that the number of women arrested for drunk driving rose nearly 30 percent in the nine years between 1998 and 2007. In California alone, between 1994 and 2009, that number doubled, going from 10.6 percent of all drivers to 21.2 percent. Women over forty had among the highest rates of arrest.

There is evidence that alcohol dependence among women is also rising precipitously. Two large national surveys of drinking habits, conducted in 1991 and 1992, and again in 2001 and 2002, found that women born between 1954 and 1963 had an 80 percent greater chance of developing dependence on alcohol than women who were born between 1944 and 1953. For men of those generations, the rate stayed flat.

The topic of women and alcohol is a relatively new one in academic research, with only a handful of experts around the country. Sharon Wilsnack, a distinguished professor of clinical neuroscience at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, became one of its pioneers as a graduate student at Harvard in the early 1970s. Though she has published hundreds of academic papers about women and alcohol, she is perhaps best known for the longitudinal studies of women's drinking she began conducting

with her husband, sociologist Richard Wilsnack, in the early 1980s. Since then, the Wilsnacks have directed and analyzed in-depth, face-to-face interviews about drinking habits with more than eleven hundred women ages twenty-one to sixty-nine.

In the most recent evaluations of the study completed in 2002, Wilsnack noticed a startling shift: a substantial increase in the number and ways in which women reported intoxication. While the stigma of female drunkenness has faded since the first study in the early 1980s, Wilsnack is struck by the openness with which women today describe their drinking habits. She wasn't at all surprised by the frank talk of my train partner, since she hears similar anecdotes at the lectures she gives on college campuses.

"There is a pattern of intentional drinking, with a whole plan behind it," she says. "Drinking on an empty stomach; predrinking before going to a party or a bar; learning to do straight shots. They are very aware of their drinking, and how to manipulate it for maximum effect."

Wilsnack was struck by another new finding. In the early 1980s, one in ten women answered yes to the question: "Are you concerned about your drinking?" In 2002, it was one in five.

That corresponds with what Rick Grucza, an epidemiologist at Washington University in St. Louis, found in his research on the generational shift of female alcohol dependence. Because it's unlikely that anyone could accurately remember how much they drank the previous decade, Grucza compared how people in the same age groups responded to questions about their consumption in two national surveys, the first conducted in 1991–1992, and then ten years later. What he found among women was especially striking. When Grucza and his colleagues compared the two surveys, they saw a flattening in consumption among younger and older men. The opposite was true for women. "More women were drinking, and among those women, more women were becoming dependent," Grucza told me.

Grucza is a young guy, in his midforties, with a salt-and-pepper goatee and a wry midwestern wit. He also partakes—"I enjoy it," he told me—and steers clear of moralizing. He is careful not to place a value judgment on the behavioral narrowing of the gender gap. For Grucza, the issue is how alcohol disproportionately harms women.

Women of childbearing age are incessantly warned that alcohol poses a danger to the developing fetus, but nobody talks much about why women in general are more vulnerable to alcohol's toxic effects, too. They absorb more alcohol into their bloodstream than men because they have a higher percentage of body fat, and a lower percentage of water. Fat cells retain alcohol, but water dilutes it, so women drinking the same amount as men their size and weight become intoxicated more quickly than the men. Males also have more of the enzyme alcohol dehydrogenase that breaks down alcohol before it enters the bloodstream. This may be one reason alcohol-related liver and brain damage appears more quickly in heavy-drinking women than men. Alcohol-dependent women have