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The Upside of a Bottle

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Growing up in a small town, I am unaccustomed to the fast paced lives of people from urban areas. My elementary school, middle school, and high school were all within a mile of one another. I knew from kindergarten that I would graduate with all the same kids because the nearest school was fifteen miles away. There is one major road, where the speed limit barely peaks at 50 mph, and it spans thirty miles and connects three major towns. I wholeheartedly think my mom could run for mayor and win because she honestly knows everyone of importance and knows the name of every homeless person who spends more than a few weeks in town. I have also spent most of my nineteen years living in this bubble where I felt safe from the rest of the world, like nothing could ever harm me and my parents were my superheroes.

Though they have been divorced since I was four, my parents provided me with everything I could have ever imagined growing up. My mother is a cashier at a local grocery store and my father is physically disabled and unable to work. During my childhood, my mother was not nearly as involved in the everyday aspects of my life as my father was. Because he did not work, we had an incredibly close relationship. However, because of his physical limitations, I have always seen my father as a fragile and taken it upon myself to make sure he is in as little pain as possible. I never had the ordinary childhood with the father who likes to run and play catch or taught me how to play sports because his body forbid him from doing so.

Despite these somewhat abnormal circumstances, I grew up feeling loved and led a very successful childhood. Though I am an only child, I have an enormous extended family who feel more like extra parents and brothers and sisters rather than aunts, uncles, and cousins. Whenever I would do something out of line, my aunts were the first to hear about it via three-way phone calls and emails and of course, they could hardly wait to address the issue the next time I stepped foot into their homes. Their children on the other hand loved to play pranks on me because I was the baby of the family. The Easter after my fifth birthday, my cousins, Wesley and Adam, took it upon themselves to give me a shiny, tin foil wrapped chicken flavored bouillon cube to me after I can sweetly asked for a piece of their Easter candy. By the time I turned thirteen, my simple and happy childhood life began to take a very different shape.

Two months after my thirteenth birthday, my father moved to the big, intimidating, yet fascinating city of Los Angeles. This left my mother and me in the small town of Auburn, California. It was the first time in nine years that I had to come home to my mom's house every day and it was an enormous change for the both of us. We were always in each other's way and we could not seem to find a common ground on almost any conversational subject. Just like most teenager girls, my mother and I did not have a lot in common and I was convinced that she just did not get me. "Why do you like that kind of music?" "You're too

young to think about tattoos.” “Your clothes are too tight, your shirt is too low cut, and those shoes...” I began to resent the small town I had spent my whole life in and with my father’s move to LA, I finally saw an opportunity to spread my wings and be my own person.

Tension in my household grew, as my mother and I fought to see eye to eye on everything. It took me eight months before I finally voiced my desire to get the fuck out of that tiny town. That June, after months of speaking to my dad about wanting to move to LA, my mom finally discovered what was really going on. I was a product of the MySpace era and when my mother learned that I held an account behind her back she demanded my password and was horrified to find out that I hated Auburn and frequently talked about how badly I wanted to leave. I was honest with her and told her I needed to leave. I figured starting high school in a new place would not be that bad. To the mind of a rebellious thirteen year old, the plan was flawless. Unbeknownst to me, my mother was already suffering from alcoholism and it broke her heart to see me fight so hard to leave the life she had fought tooth and nail to provide for me. I saw this as her desire to control my life and to strive to make me as miserable as possible.

By the time I started high school, I was well aware of the fact that my mother had a drinking problem and I believe my family was just as attuned to it as I was. The Christmas of my freshman year in high school, my mother’s gift to me was her first trip to a substance abuse rehabilitation center. She timed it perfectly so that I would be in LA visiting my dad, that way I could tell him I was just too busy to have time to talk to her while I was out of town. I will never forget having to lie to my dad and his family because I was told by my mom to keep it a secret from him in order to keep peace between both sides of my family. My parents have never had an agreeable relationship since they split up. They fought like cats and dogs, so my mom was scared of the repercussions if my dad found out she was sick.

My mom chose to stay at this center for about two days and left feeling like she had her drinking under control. She claimed she had checked out early because she had been threatened by a resident there. I know now that she left early because she was embarrassed for having to seek help for alcohol. At this point in my life, my mother would best be characterized as a functional alcoholic. She was able to drink heavily, pass out on the couch, and then get up and go to work. She still made it to every single one of my sporting events and meetings, and was never late to pick me up from school. She would spend the next three years trying to convince family and friends that she was in full control of her drinking and that she could put down a bottle any time she wanted.

There were good times during these early years of her alcoholism. It took her years to wither away into the lifeless, hurtful, and violent person she would grow into. There were times when we were able to set aside my difficult teenage

attitude and her overbearing motherly personality. I remember how we would share shoes and spend hours dancing in high heels all over the house to music like Santana, Usher, and Jason Mraz. She always used to tell me that I “danced pretty good for a white girl”. It always made me laugh because she was just as white as I was. Coming from a family that raised her to believe that good women and mothers did not work or have careers, my mother was determined to have me experience as many possibilities as I could and to find my passion in life. With her encouragement, I have gone white water rafting, swam, played water polo and basketball, ran cross country, flown a plane, taken sailing lessons, learned how to ski and snowboard, spent my summers wakeboarding and water skiing, played the piano, flute, and guitar, visited countless museums, and gone on road trips all over California and Oregon. These experiences have made me a desire to be active and fearless in my life, but the good times and memories with my mom became few and far between as she became more and more trapped in her alcoholism.

By the summer before my senior year of high school, my chance to leave Auburn finally arrived. My mom was really sick at this time and I was tired of hearing about her. Every day I came home to different type of disaster. She would show up to events drunk and make offhand comments that made me want to bury my head ten feet underground. When I would go to visit family, all they wanted to talk about was how I was doing. “I’m so proud of you, I don’t know how you haven’t had a breakdown yet,” they would say. “You know that your mom’s situation puts you at a higher risk to drink or marry an addict,” as if I needed reminders about the statistics. “Do you need anything? Is there any way I can help?” Well not exactly, not unless you’re God. So I spoke with my family about moving in with my dad in Los Angeles. Despite their initial reservations, my family agreed that it would be best and would help me get away from the negative environment. They agreed that it was no child should ever have to find someone to call the paramedics because their mother fell out of bed and broke her nose during one of her bad days. They knew that I couldn’t continue to live in a world where I struggled to get her to even eat because she spent so much time consuming alcohol as her sole source of nutrition.

I don’t even know how she managed to get alcohol because by this time she wasn’t driving much and she definitely wasn’t going to work, but I decided I couldn’t be responsible for keeping track of her any longer. It took me about three days to pack and then I was off to the big city I had always wanted to live in! The first few months or so that I lived in Los Angeles were almost surreal. I loved that the city never got dark, there were things to do and people to see all the time and that I was immersed in a totally new school that had more options for me to succeed. I put on a facade that my life was finally picture perfect. I was away from my mother so I never had to hear about how poorly she was doing unless it was absolutely necessary.

Truly, I was happier and enthusiastic about my new life, but it was still hard. When my friends from home posted their homecoming dance pictures, I knew I would never be in another one with them. Suddenly, the kids I spent my whole life planning to graduate with were not going to be the ones who watched me accept my diploma. The aunts, uncles, and cousins I had spent almost every day with my whole life were not so far away that I would not see them for months at a time. Although I pushed to avoid conversations about my mother and how stressed my family was in Northern California, I also felt tremendous guilt for leaving them alone to deal with her. I was trying so hard to be everything to everyone. I was the jack of all trades and it got old really fast, being the A student, trying to make new friends, caring for my elderly father and disabled grandfather, and trying to help my family with my mother from over 300 miles away pushed me to anger or tears when other minor thing came up.

In order to keep it together, I started to focus intently on my school work. My last year of high school, I got the highest GPA I had ever earned. Without my final year in LA, I dont think I ever would have made it to LMU. Once I started school here, though, I thought everything would finally go back to some sort of normalcy. However, the summer of 2012 presented itself as the hardest summer of my life. After repeated trips to the emergency room and several arrests, my family and I decided that she was no longer capable of making her own decisions, so we stepped in. From Temecula, my aunt was able to arrange a detox facility for my mother to go and a following rehabilitation facility once she was clean.

In July, I drove to Auburn to pack up the only place that had ever been "home". It had been several months since I had been home and never in a thousand years would I have been able to imagine what the house would look like. My mother is stubborn and was trying to convince my family she wasn't drinking so she would take a medication called Ant-abuse, which makes you violently ill if you have been drinking. There was evidence of this all over the house. She had not fed her cats in who knows how long. She had anticipated our arrival, so in permanent marker she wrote on the cabinets' things like, "taxes" and "other shit". I had always seen alcoholism as a personal choice and something she had just ignorantly chosen to deal with, but I realize know that it's not like that at all. She had taken a sharpie to the walls and wrote pleas for help that she couldn't lose this battle; she wrote on the concrete that she had begged the police to come and keep her safe from herself, but they wouldn't come, and finally she had challenged the devil in a way that is uniquely my mom. She wrote, "bring it on Lucifer". It was on this day that I finally figured out that alcoholism is not a choice; no person in their right mind would put themselves through that kind of hell. It opened up my eyes to just how much she was suffering, but even through all that pain, my mother was in there somewhere. That was the day that I finally let go of all my resentment, my attitudes, and my anger towards her and her

drinking.

That was nine months ago. My beautiful, compassionate, and kind-hearted mother is finally back to being the person who used to only exist in my memory. She is honest with herself about her problems and admits that she had never gone more than thirty days without drinking since the time she was pregnant with me. She works her program and goes to AA meetings and has befriended some of the most incredible people I could possibly imagine. She has also had to cope with the reality that many of her friends have relapsed, and she has had to cope without the use of alcohol. I know this isn't necessarily the end of her journey with alcoholism, but I pray every day that it is.

Alcoholism has played a major role in my life and it has taken me years to embrace the idea that alcohol has shaped, shifted, and created the person who stands before you today. In my first drafts about my mom and her drinking, I expressed the more mature side of my feelings, but it wasn't always like that. I wasn't always okay with where my life was and I was most definitely not content with the role my mother played in my life. My mother has always been my financial stability, but other than that we didn't have much of a relationship. In fact, I hated her for a long time. After my freshman year of high school when she wouldn't let me move to LA, our relationship only got worse. I saw her as controlling and rude and could barely stand to sit on the same couch with her. I didn't understand how the woman who told me every day that, "the first time [she] knew God loved her was when he gave her me" could continue to drink and put me through an emotional hell. I didn't understand how if I was the best thing in her life why she refused to pick me over the bottle.

I hated it. I hated being home. But after that summer, I really was able to examine our relationship and my feelings about her as I packed up my home. I realized that she had always put me first and sacrificed her own comforts to make sure I was happy. It is easy for me to tell you that I hated her than for me to admit that I came home every day terrified I would find her dead. I tried to rehabilitate her myself. It was just the two of us and I hoped that picking up Taco Bell every day after school and doing everything I could would make it better, but I was naive and foolish. Last summer, I realized I have spent so much time fighting the fact that my parents are addicts that I haven't been able to let myself be happy. I have spent so many years pretending to be okay to friends, family, and loved ones that I forgot what it felt like to be happy for more than just a day or two.

In my room at my mom's home, as I sobbed over packing my life into boxes, I realized that I do not have control over the role alcohol plays in my life and I will never be able to control the actions of either of my parents. I am trying to learn how to be happy despite them. I am learning to celebrate every day of sobriety because it might not be there tomorrow, and for once I don't think I'd take it out on her if she relapsed. Her soul is afflicted by something that is much

greater than you or I. Something I will hopefully, god willing, never be able to fathom. I am the happiest I have ever been and that is my greatest achievement thus far. I am an active member in the LMU community in all aspects: employment, clubs, Greek life, and academics. I am the product of an alcoholic household and I am pretty damn proud of where I am at this moment in my life.

I wrote this narrative almost two years ago. In the time that has passed between the writing of the original copy and my life now, many things have changed. My mother did inevitably relapse several months ago, but that was only after she became a home owner for the first time in her life. It took her several months to get sober, but she wakes up every day and does the best she can. She is looking for new forms of employment because she believes her job heavily impacts her sobriety. She still hates tattoos, but our journey together through alcoholism and how it has shaped my character is now permanently inscribed in the skin on my left ribcage, as my daily reminder of her. We grow in these experiences together no matter how many miles may separate us. She is my rock, day in and day out, and come what may, we will get through it together in the healthiest way we know how.