

Positive Changes

Catherine wakes up on Saturday to greet the morning sun. She slips out of bed easily and glances out her bedroom window. The street below is unmoving. It will be a while until lunchgoers come; older married couples to the Italian restaurant, younger people to the noodle house or the barbecue that borders it. But right now only a woman walking her dog passes beneath her.

In the past few weeks, she's been waking up earlier, and the mornings have been less harsh to her. Most weekdays, she doesn't even need her usual cup of instant coffee. It's not an unwelcome phenomenon, but it is a bit strange. She's not used to being fully awake as she brushes her teeth and washes her face.

She looks at herself in the mirror. Perhaps she's just seeing what she wants to see, but she thinks that the dark patches of her skin under her eyes look less prominent. She tries to imagine her face without them, but it's difficult. Her skin also seems clearer, and has some of the fat on her cheeks fallen off? It's always been irritating to her that her cheeks make her unphotogenic when she smiles. But she smiles now, and it doesn't seem so bad.

Catherine ties her hair into a sloppy ponytail. She switches into a sports bra, an old white tank top, and a gray pair of running shorts. As she leaves the apartment, she glances at a small whiteboard magnetized to her refrigerator. There's a hastily-written 26 inscribed on it in red marker. She erases it and writes 27. It's been almost a month now since she's stopped drinking.

Her ex-boyfriend, Martin, brought up her drinking habits, about two months before they broke up. They'd been driving back from dinner one day and she'd asked him to stop at a convenience store so that she could buy a can of beer. She'd ordered a glass of wine at dinner, but of course it had been one of those fancy restaurants that Martin liked where you could never get enough wine without bankrupting yourself.

"You're definitely drinking too much," Martin said, as he watched her sip the beer in the passenger seat.

"This is only my third drink today," she pointed out. "You know in college that'd I

have three just to pregame."

"Yeah, yeah, you've told me enough times. Just listen to yourself, boasting about how much you can drink. It makes me sick."

That comment sparked an hour-long shouting match between them. Catherine accused Martin of being a prude, and suggested that he should pick up women at church service. Martin retorted by saying maybe he would, and while he was at it she could find someone at rehab. He also went on some tangent about how immature she was, and that as her boyfriend he was morally obligated to call her out on it.

Of course, she had known that Martin didn't like alcohol. He drank little of it himself, and he blamed his father's continuous drinking for his parent's divorce. But he had never been particularly snide about it.

Unsurprisingly, their relationship nosedived after that fight. Martin never backed down on his insistence that she was an alcoholic, and she adamantly refused to change her drinking habits. One Friday night, long after it had grown cold, it finally ended. Catherine couldn't remember precisely how, but she woke up the next morning noticing a lot of broken glass in her apartment, and a corresponding loss of two wine glasses. One of them had been quite angry, it seemed. Martin had blocked her number.

Running offers a lot of time to think, and Catherine inadvertently thinks of Martin during her thirty-block circuit of her neighborhood. Martin had never been particularly considerate, and he never seemed to be well-attuned to her feelings. The way that they had broken up disturbed her, because she had no memory of it, but overall this new drive of hers wasn't about Martin. She didn't particularly miss him, a sentiment shared by one of her closest friends, Ashley, who was even now offering to set her up with single guys they knew who were "hotter than Martin." And it wasn't like she hadn't seen the writing on the wall. But the breakup was a useful punctuation mark to separate two phases of her life. A move, or a promotion at her job, would have been equally valid.

The sun is still a while away from its apex. It's cool outside, just chilly enough to offset the burn from running and stop her from sweating too much. Catherine looks around her as she runs. She's lived in Chicago almost six years, and seen this scenery many times before, but now she's finding details in the buildings around her that she's

never noticed. A stained-glass angel holding a staff in the second-story window of a Catholic church. A jiu-jitsu studio that she must have overlooked, its floor covered with green mats. A herbal tea shop that seems new, and well-polished; she makes a mental note to check it out later. But not every detail is pleasant; there are also piles of discarded packaging and fast-food remains. Unable to hold her breath while running, she smells the worst of the trash.

Running feels less stressful today, easier than normal. Of course, she's panting hard, but she doesn't lack air. Her muscles are exhausted, but they're not screaming in protest. She doesn't try to count how many blocks are left, or how many she's already run. Is it because she's awake now, or is it because she's been sober? She doesn't know.

In the few days after the breakup, she didn't change her habits at all. A stubborn part inside her didn't wish to capitulate to Martin's complaints, even though he would never have witnessed it. But after two weeks, after she noticed how much wine she'd bought without thinking, she had to admit that Martin might have been right.

It was, Catherine reflected, one of those psychological phenomena that she would've expected to hear in a podcast or a clickbait article online. It was hard to listen to Martin, especially after he'd been such an ass. But if she herself thought her drinking was a problem, if it was her own desire to change, then mustering the motivation was easier. So she decided to quit. She was old enough to, anyway. At that age where it was perfectly respectable to not spend every Friday in a bar.

The week after her decision was hell. Catherine had crippling headaches that no medication could banish, and felt nauseous enough that it was stressful to eat. Abdominal pain that made period cramps feel like childplay. She had to call in sick twice that week, which was no big loss because with how little she had been able to sleep, she doubted she was getting much work done anyway. She spent most of the week curled up at home, watching old shows and trying to distract herself from the withdrawal symptoms. At any point, she might have given in and taken a drink, but she was horrified by how strong her withdrawal symptoms were. Soon, it became a matter of pride for her to get through them. After a week, as if sensing her conviction, her body

stopped protesting. It was all uphill from there.

By now she's recovered. She knows this not by counting days, but because she feels different. Better. More awake and more alive.

Catherine finishes the route in front of Vibrant Greens, a deli that she favors. It's pricier than most, but she's liked the ability to customize her salads. It's barely ten-thirty, so she's surprised to see someone else there; a tall, broad-shouldered man who's dressed like he's going to work. He studies the menu.

When he hears her come in he turns. "Go ahead," he says. "I'm still looking."

He's pretty cute, she thinks. Angular face, slicked hair, and he looks pretty good in a light blue button-down shirt, even if it looks makes him look a bit stiff. She nods and slips past him, ordering her usual salad: a lot of avocado and arugula to start with, and a sprinkling of other ingredients to break the green monotony.

Catherine pays and sits down, one of those large wooden tables that seats twelve. She hears the man order. "Whatever she ordered, I think." He looks at her and gives her a small smile. She finds herself comparing him to Martin, and decides that this stranger compares favorably.

The man sits down at the same table, diagonal from her. Now she's incredibly aware how she must look, sweating and flushed and not dressed properly. No makeup, and worse, she hasn't showered yet.

"Is the salad good?" she asks after he's taken a few bites.

"Definitely," the man replies. "I feel healthier already. You must be some kind of salad expert."

"Not really," she says. "I've just been here a lot. I've tried basically everything at that point."

"Well, whatever you want to call it," says the man. "I usually don't eat salads. You do look pretty healthy, so I thought you'd know better than me at least."

Catherine takes a few moments to think whether this counts as flirting. If it is, it's a bit outside the standard playbook. *Healthy* isn't your typical compliment, but it sounds like a good thing.

"So what's the occasion? Why are you dressed on a beautiful Saturday?" she asks.

"I wish there was an occasion," he says ruefully, picking up a piece of avocado and studying it. "I have work." At her inquiring look, he continued. "I'm a lawyer, but just an associate. So it's a lot of bitch work for me, at least for a few years."

She nods. "That has to suck," she says. "I don't know if I could stand working on Saturdays."

"You get used to it," he says. "And I hear it'll be worth it eventually."

Silence for several moments. Catherine notices that the man eats quickly. If she wants to do something, she doesn't have much time.

"Think you'll be finished by dinner?" she asks, trying to keep the question innocent-sounding.

"I doubt it," he says. "Probably later in the evening. Early enough to get drinks after, though. If you're up for it."

She only briefly thinks about the alcohol. She's not giving this up. "I am," she says, smiling.

That afternoon Catherine drives to the supermarket. Better to get this out of the way, so she doesn't have to worry about doing errands tomorrow.

She's still surprised by how much more productive she's been in the last few weeks. Two weeks ago she cleaned her apartment, throwing out all the stray items that she hadn't cared much about before and vacuuming every room methodically. Afterwards, it looked almost like one of those apartments from realtors' advertisements. Ashley came over for dinner one day and had flitted from room to room in surprise, not believing that Catherine had done it herself.

"Imagine that. Cat actually organizing a room. I'd think you were trying to get laid," her friend had said, grinning.

Catherine doesn't want to attribute all of this to sobriety. It almost makes her ashamed to admit that for the past several years, she's been directly responsible for many of her flaws simply by drinking. She decides that it was like a chain reaction. One she decided to not drink, it made it easier to do other responsible things. It was like a set of dominos of positive reinforcement, which again sounds like an overhyped psychological trick. She can't help but see Emilio as the apex of this trend. Admittedly,

he doesn't know him that well, but something tells her that they will get along very well. Just as her breakup punctuated a previous part of her life, it makes sense that Emilio should herald a new one. Her life will take on a new theme.

Her excitement is tempered only by the nagging whisper at the back of her mind, reminding her that she isn't supposed to drink. She feels guilty about it, but what could she do? It was routine to meet at bars, she'd look stupid if she avoided it. She reminds herself that she stopped drinking because she didn't want to be subservient to a substance. But if she runs from it, then she's under its control, anyway.

Unbidden, the red 27 flashes in her mind. She decides that she should make an exception for today; if she manages at most two drinks, she'll let it pass.

Catherine finishes her route through the supermarket, she checks the items in her cart. Eggs, a few different vegetables, yogurt, some pasta, fish, chicken breast.

Right before going to the cashier, Catherine stops by the wine section. The display always looks enticing, with its neat rows of colored bottles just asking to be looked over. Many times she's enjoyed browsing, picking out new flavors to try or coming back to her favorites. There's still a cabinet full of wines in her apartment, a sort of rainy-day fund of alcohol she'd created. In the last month since she quit, she hasn't found a good way to give them away yet.

She's in control, she reminds herself as she turns away. Not buying anything is proof of it. She's in control.

Emilio is already at the counter when she arrives. He looks a bit weary, but grins broadly and waves when he sees her.

Catherine is wearing a violet dress with a silver collar necklace, and her hair is down now. She doesn't want to look too dressed up, but she feels that a contrast to this morning's appearance is in order.

"You look great," Emilio says, and he sounds like he means it.

"So do you. So, how was work?" she asks, looking over the admittedly impressive menu posted on the wall.

"Not terribly interesting. My firm has a big case right now, some tech company is in big shit for *alleged* IP theft. We're defending them."

"Ugh. Tech companies," she says. "Can't ever tell what they're actually up to."

"I know, right? There are too many of them now, it has to be some kind of bubble."

Emilio recommends her a kiwi-lemon cocktail, which sounds suspicious, but she humors him and tries it. It's a strange flavor, more sour than most fruity cocktails she's had. Not her favorite, but it can't be chugged, which is probably good for tonight. She tells Emilio that he has interesting tastes.

They go through the standard inquiries, the icebreaker phase of dates that Catherine always dislikes. Only lately she's realized it would be easier if she hadn't spent so much time in bars. Luckily, Emilio's life isn't very interesting either, something he himself admits. Outside of work, he spends his time in the gym or hanging out with friends. She's not much better, she tells him, though she wants to pick up painting again, having been okay at it in high school. When they both finish the strange fruit cocktail, she looks over the menu and selects a Caribbean rum mixture, which turns out to be red orange with a rich flavor.

After they get to know each other, Catherine finds that it's easy to talk to Emilio. They don't even have much in common: she likes country music and he likes metal; she watches true crime and he prefers documentaries; her last vacation was to Miami and his was to Vegas. But it doesn't matter. There's no need to pretend to be someone she's not, although she tries to hide traces of her former drinking problem. Of course, she tells herself she'll bring it up one day, if they actually start dating, but there's no need to think that far ahead now.

For her third drink she chooses a blue tequila, just to complete the color wheel.

In any case, Emilio doesn't seem to notice anything amiss, and he seems to like her irregularities and her humor, something that Martin never did. She finds out that if he had infinite money he'd learn how to cook much better and open a steakhouse, and she shares that she would travel the world and write a travelogue. She doubts that Martin would be open to such a conversation; he was too "pragmatic" as he liked to say, and "unimaginative" as she likes to think now.

One minute blends into the next seamlessly they talk. She must be having a lot of fun, then. Not surprising, she and Emilio clearly have chemistry. She doesn't even remember ordering or tasting her fourth drink, but when Emilio gets up to relieve himself

she finds herself staring at an empty cup, a tall wooden container painted and carved with red faces on the side. That's odd; it must not have been a very interesting drink. It reminds her of the times she's overslept by snoozing her morning alarm, forgetting about it, and drifting back to sleep. She studies the cup, thinking that it's a shame to have such a fancy cup that's empty, because then what's the point of the decoration? She doesn't know why, but the thought makes her feel somber.

Catherine looks over the menu again, trying to make out the too-small words, when Emilio comes back. He asks if she's sure she should be drinking more, because she looks a bit flushed and her speech is worsening. She feels a flash of irritation.

"I'm fine," she says. But the words a bit distorted, not the way she imagined, so she says it a few more times. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Really."

"You sure? Because you seem kind of out of it," he says. It seems like concern, but it still annoys her a bit. This wasn't the kind of conversation she wanted to have.

"I thought you'd want me to get drunk." she says jokingly, trying to lighten the mood. "You know, being a guy and all."

Emilio doesn't laugh at this one. "What are you implying, exactly?" she hears him say. Evidently her humor didn't get through.

She shrugs. "Look, I'm not really that drunk yet."

"I think you are."

"Look," she says impatiently, "Stop being annoying about this. Really. You're reminding me a bit too much like my ex right now. Real annoying guy he was, definitely a prick."

Emilio doesn't say anything. He merely stares at her for a few seconds. Then he gets up, pushes in his stool, and walks purposefully towards the door. He can't be leaving, can he? She didn't seem to be thinking very clearly, but even she could tell that this should be rude.

"Where do you think you're going?" she calls out to his back. "Can you just leave like that?"

He only turns his head a little. "I'm not here to babysit," he says, and she sees judgment in his eyes, keeps walking.

This fucking guy! She can't believe what she's hearing. She jumps off her stool to

follow him.

"Look, you dick," she says, struggling to make each word clear. "It's not my fault if you can't take a fucking joke. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Catherine doesn't realize how loud her voice is, doesn't realize that every single person in the bar is looking at her, including the bartender and the overweight bouncer. It wasn't a particularly loud bar, she vaguely remembered, that's why they were able to talk so much.

The bouncer comes up to them. "Sir, ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he says.

"Fine by me," seethes Emilio, and he stalks rapidly out the door.

She's said what she wanted to say. She looks around at her, seeing judgmental faces. They avert their eyes as she looks at them. It was kind of sad, really. They probably thought they were superior to her, just because she'd had one or two more drinks than they'd had.

"Righteous fucks," she mutters to herself as she stomps out the door.

Now that she thinks about it, this was a bad idea in the first place. She should have known that Martin wasn't all that unique, that other men would be just like him. Patronizing and nosy. They couldn't just be happy with how she was, they always had to try to *change* her.

She calls an Uber, because she's not patient enough for the metro right now. The driver doesn't ask stupid questions, which makes him a lot better than Emilio and Martin, and she tips him well for it. And when she gets to her apartment she almost runs to her kitchen closet and finds any bottle of wine, pouring it into the first cup she finds in her cabinets. She's pissed off. Might as well have a good drink while not being bothered by anyone.

Catherine wakes up with her head lying on the kitchen table. As she raises her head, she still feels its cold imprint on her cheek. Her head pulses with an aching pain, and her entire body feels as dry as a prune. She knows this feeling all too well. And she knows, even before she sees her surroundings, that she failed.

She doesn't want to think about it, but she can't stop herself. She relives all the

memories she have, cringing internally as she remembers the idiotic things she said. She had thought everything was going smoothly, but the date had been going downhill for some time before Emilio left. How could she have been so oblivious? If she'd just realized how drunk she was, this all could have been averted, she would have been only one explanation away...

And how, in the first place, had she convinced herself to go to a bar in the first place? She'd been reckless, so overconfident. She'd thought she'd won over alcohol, but as soon as the first sip touched her lips she'd already lost.

She opens her eyes. Strong sunlight streams through the kitchen window, illuminating an empty bottle of rosé wine and a glass cup. It must be around noon. By a well-learned habit, she knows to get water. She takes the cup and walks to the sink, feeling her head spin. The tap water's slightly chemical flavor is welcome, but it's barely any relief against how dry her entire body feels. She feels like she might vomit, but as she leans over the sink it never comes. Disappointing.

As she drinks, her gaze falls on the red 27 on her whiteboard. The bright numerals accuse her, reminding her what she lost in a few hours of indiscretion. She closes her eyes, feeling her pulse through the blood pounding in her head.

"I am an alcoholic," she says slowly, out loud. It's so hard to get those words out, to admit that she is powerless. She hopes the admitting it to herself will make it easier to do what has to be done.

Catherine thinks about the parties all those years ago, when she was still a sorority girl and drinks were passed around like paper. They complained about their hangovers as small talk back then. She remembers making out while slightly buzzed, the cocktails taking away her self-doubt and making her bold. She thinks about the times she and Ashley and Jennifer drank until the morning light, talking about their lives and about the future. The memories pull at her, tendons that she will have to sever to be free.

Her glance falls on the cabinet where she knows a trove of wine bottles are stored. She walks over and opens it, seeing the two dozen or so neatly lined bottles. This, too, will have to go. What a waste it will be. She takes one bottle down, uncaps it, and walks back to the sink, trying to steel herself to dump the bottle.

She thinks about the coming week, the pain that she already knows is in store for

her if she refuses her body's cravings. She thinks about going to work tomorrow, sleep-deprived. Can she call in sick any more? Someone is bound to ask questions or start some rumors then. It can't be very believable that she didn't get better over the entire weekend.

No, if she thinks about it, it doesn't make any sense to try again right now. The Christmas holidays are soon, and that will be a good time to restart her sobriety streak. She'll be better prepared, having experienced withdrawal once. She can make sure to succeed then. That sounds much better, much more logical.

A heavy weight lifts from Catherine's shoulders. She might have screwed up, but it's fine. Mistakes only make you stronger, after all. She has a plan. When the new year comes, she will be completely sober. She inhales the earthy smell of the wine bottle she's holding, and sips.