

## Heredity Is a Bitch

I am told by my husband that the aunt is visiting. I am in the hospital, having had a seizure. The doctors say they don't know why I had the seizure, but I know. I don't divulge my secret, though. They are the doctors, not I. Aunt is here to take care of, or at least, make dinner and act natural for my two kids and my sorry excuse of a husband so I won't be worried while I am recovering in the hospital.

I should probably be more generous in my thoughts, but I don't feel like it. I am in the hospital, it is summer, which is why aunt can come out—she's a teacher during the school year—as am I. Summer is the hardest because I am not as busy. There are no papers to grade, no concepts to explore, no wonderful new methods to introduce—just keeping the house, taking care of the kids, and sometimes, the husband. I hate that. It's because I hate thinking about my life, my history, and all the efforts I have made over the years to camouflage my anger, my despair, my anger, really, at my Mom. I am not a teenager.

I am just past 50 and should be anticipating my future retirement, living the life without the burdens I have placed on myself—on purpose—to avoid living my life alone. I am now alone in the hospital, and I suddenly have come full circle and I cherish the solitude. But those burdens are still there, no matter what I do, and what's worse, it's my own fault. I waited so long to break out—convincing myself for years that I could handle it all—handle everything, and I slowly took control of my inner being, and locked the door of my past—firmly—and threw away the key. Only I found it. I know that's a cliché, but sometimes clichés are true, aren't they?

I didn't mean to start drinking. It was not a habit of mine or Larry's (my husband). It started gradually—a little wine with dinner, another glass with a show before bed. Larry and I had several shows we liked to watch together—still getting DVD's in those days in the mail from Netflix. Later, streaming.

But the glass became a bottle, and then the wine became vodka, and, you know...Have you ever known an alcoholic? I used to think it was a term invented to dress up a drunk, but Aunt says no. She should know. Her own dad was an alcoholic, and his sister, and his sister's son, who had a stroke and died from alcoholism, and her father's father, who abandoned his family to drink himself to death. Aunt's own sons are alcoholics, but she still hopes that they will someday decide to stop. But her father wasn't my mother's father. Really, Aunt is a half-aunt, and a decade younger than my mom, but she lived through all that and didn't become an alcoholic herself.

My mother's father was a musician, and he abandoned the family, my grandma, my mom and her two brothers to follow his own path, presumably, music, but who knows? Grandma said she thought he was doing drugs, but she was 19 when she married him, and 24 when he abandoned her and their children, so she didn't really know. I think it's human nature to want to blame a person's faults on something outside of himself, rather than the person himself, and grandma does have a tendency to do that, so I don't know. My mom doesn't remember her dad, though. She remembers Aunt's dad, who was a volatile, mean drunk, whom she both hated and admired. She was very much like him, even if they weren't related.

She would kill me if she knew I said that, but it's the truth. She has a habit of reinventing herself, and so did he, as Aunt tells it. He made himself over in those days

to hide his record to be able to continue working. Construction companies tend to forgive drunkenness—up to a point. My mom reinvents herself to cover her tracks too, because if those things never happened, then she is guiltless, and I am the evil one. She has done it so often, that I have made her angry over and over again, trying to navigate her stories, trying to keep up, keeping the truth out. I hate that too.

Letting the truth out, though, has become a flash flood, and that's why I keep drinking—to stem the flood waters—but it really doesn't work and I'm fooling myself, but I get to bask in the half-light of shallow, made-up memories briefly before I am carried away in the next flood.

I have been fooling myself for a long time, and now that I'm 51, I am tired of putting my head down and pretending it didn't happen—all those events did not occur—because my mother said so. This has been the holy grail—what my mother says happened, versus what I remember.

Aunt pointed out years ago that you can't trust a drunk's memory, that if a person has a memory and was sober at the time, it probably happened, and if that person is a drunk, it most likely didn't, or at least, the drunk's version didn't. I went for years denying my past, and now it's eating me up, and I am allowing it—the pain is almost sweet relief compared to the years of silence and rigid calm. It is nice to let that go in favor of hanging it all out there. And the pain, well, the pain is so acute, that I sometimes cut myself to feel that physical pain, which is real, and the other is just mind stuff and I shouldn't let it in.

My mother thinks I am a “vindictive bitch,” and sometimes I think she is right, but I remember our shared past, and she really doesn't. And if she does remember, she

denies it all, so I am on my own. Do I acquiesce to my mother's view of the world, to keep the peace, to hold onto her "love" for me, to hold onto her—the only constant in my life before I was able to escape to college--or do I hold onto my own? For years I succumbed to the stronger woman, my mother, who psychologically bullied me into acquiescence, but no more. Now I drink. She calls me an alcoholic. She is right about that. She should know.

Aunt told me that her father was in AA and they told them that alcoholism was not inherited, but the "tendency to alcoholism" was. I just smiled. So did she. The irony of it! As if putting it in those terms made it less likely that your child would inherit alcoholism! Aunt insisted it must be inherited—look at all the relatives! And I said, "Heredity is a bitch!" We both started laughing then. That's when I was on the other side of that divide—I didn't drink; I wasn't an alcoholic.

Sometimes I wish that I had never started, but that's all water under the bridge, now. That water flowed over the bridge as well—as in flash flood. It took me about six years to become a full-fledged alcoholic—and now here I am, in the hospital recovering from a seizure. I wasn't drinking. That's what happened. I stopped drinking cold turkey, and I had been drinking so much for days, secretly of course, that I didn't anticipate the reaction my body would have to the absence of alcohol. I should have known better. Apparently, I seized in front of my youngest child—I have only two at home and three grown and on their own. It scared him to death, but now he's fine. They all have come to see me, including Aunt, who is coming over today to set me free.

When Aunt arrives, there's a hullabaloo. I am supposed to go home by the hospital bus, but Aunt is not allowed on it, and she walked over instead of driving. She

thought we could have a nice walk home together, but the nurse says no, I must return on the bus.

“Never mind,” she says. “I will walk back and meet you.”

“Ok,” I smile, remembering that there is still a bottle of vodka under the bed.

I go home, drink the vodka really fast (it’s only half a bottle) grab the car keys to the Suburban, and peel out. I see her on the bridge, almost home, so I do a fabulous U-turn which startles her, pick her up, and head to the grocery.

“You are driving a little erratically,” she observes.

I wonder if she knows. Probably. She’s looking at me funny.

“I am just so excited to be out. I feel great! We need to get groceries so I can cook for *you* tonight.”

“Caitlin, are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m fine, Aunt. I was thinking about my childhood while I was in the hospital. Do you remember when Mom cut her wrists?”

“Which time?”

My ploy worked. She’s distracted by my memory, probably feeling a little guilty that she wasn’t there to help me, or something. It always works. Though Aunt is a good ten years younger than my mom, she has been in my life, off and on, but rarely. She makes the effort. She made the effort just now. I feel a queasy sense of guilt run through me, but I continue to pursue the memory.

“I think it was over some boyfriend. You know, when we were living in the grandparents’ house, and you were all away, not sure where.”

“Oh, you mean Tony? The boyfriend?”

“Not sure. I was only five, but I remember the blood. I was scared. The neighbors next door called an ambulance and one of them took care of me while she was gone. It was only a few hours. She came back with bandaged arms.”

“I remember hearing about that. We were in Washington, then, I think. Maybe Cali. Dad was off and on again with his sobriety, so it is hard to remember, but let’s see, you were five, which makes me about sixteen, so I think we were in Cali. What happened after that?”

I winced when she said *sobriety*, but fortunately, she didn’t notice. “Nothing, really. The boyfriend was gone, and she got another, and another after that, and another and another...”

Aunt is looking at me quizzically. She looks just like an owl when she has that look, sharp nose, nostrils sucked in with her inhale, glasses and all.

I smile. “It’s hard to remember the succession of her boyfriends. They were all there to get what they could from her, and...from me.”

Aunt looks misty behind the glasses. She knows a little of my history, but not much. Really, very little. There is so much more. She wants to help me, but she can’t, not really. She was the youngest of the kids, and she wasn’t old enough to help me until I was much older, and the scars were already made—not the physical scars.

We drive to the grocery, and I make a big deal about selecting steaks, avoiding the wine and alcohol section because she is with me, and I am pretending sobriety. I have gotten pretty good at it, and generally drink vodka because it has no smell and doesn’t show on my tongue like red wine does. It also gets me high really fast, and that’s where I like to be these days.

“Do the kids like steak?” she asks.

“Oh yes, they do,” I say. It makes me happy to buy expensive groceries. When I was a child, we sometimes had little to nothing to eat. Mother made pots of beans almost continually. I can’t bear to eat any beans of any kind, other than green beans, because of it.

“Let’s buy a dessert!” I suggest to Aunt.

She smiles, and says, “What kind of dessert?”

“A cake, I think. We should celebrate my sobriety.” We walk over to the cake section, and I secretly congratulate myself on being able to use that word, *sobriety*.

I have been to rehab many times. My mother even paid once for one of them. I should be grateful, but rehab includes therapy, and therapy includes psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis includes opening up and talking about the past—and that’s a problem. When I describe my memory of my mother sitting astride a man and screaming out with some frenzied movement, my mother says it isn’t true. When I talk about her cutting her wrists, she says it isn’t true. When I talk about walking home from school and finding her passed out on the floor, and some strange man in the living room, that didn’t happen either. Only Aunt seems to believe me. My kids don’t. They think I am making it all up. Their grandmother, now sober for the best part of their growing up, is the wise one, the steady one. It doesn’t really matter about the truth—not to them. They weren’t there to see it. They didn’t experience it. Their truth is *me* being the alcoholic. It doesn’t matter that I was sober for the first twenty-five years of my marriage—and all those years before. That I was sober for the first three kids until after they entered college. None of that matters. It matters that I am a drunk *now*.

We select a cake—a lemon tart thing, and add it to the basket. I can feel my sobriety returning. I look longingly across the store at the alcohol section, but I know better than to stroll over there. I avert my head, looking down at my wallet, finding my ATM card, and pulling it out while we push the cart into a check-out line.

I drive home cautiously. I don't want to excite my aunt's suspicions any more than I already have. She is chatting about what she and the kids have been doing—my two at home mostly ignoring her, but grateful for dinner. My husband Larry, seemingly at a loss. The man can't even cook, not even barbecue. He would be at a total loss without a female to do the housewife thing. It is he that called Aunt, who came running—actually flying over several states to take care of the orphaned children and their useless dad—oops—I had better fence those thoughts. They swirl around me anyway, while I am carrying the groceries in. Aunt carries her share, and we are able to get them all into the house without going back to the car.

“Hello? Anyone home?”

My daughter comes out of her room and says, “Hi Mom.” No hug. Not sure she's happy to see me. Pretty sure she isn't. Son doesn't appear. He is avoiding me, I am sure.

I pretend that I am fine. “Hey, Susan, help with the groceries, please. Aunt and I are cooking steaks. When is Dad coming home?”

“I don't know,” Susan replies. She is stingy with her words, stingy with affection. I am used to it, but it doesn't make it better. I know I don't deserve any affection from her. I have let her down, so many times. She is a senior in high school now, and I know she is just waiting to get out—like I was.



I busy myself in the kitchen, getting the grill ready, chopping up lettuce for the salad, putting potatoes in the oven.

“They are going to take about an hour,” I say to Aunt, who is helping a little, but is distracted by the news on the TV. “I am going to gas up the car really fast. It looks low. Larry never remembers it.”

She nods her head, and I grab the keys and head out. She doesn't suspect. It's been a long time since her sons were home, since she canvassed their rooms for bottles, smelled their breath when they came home, called the hotline intervention when they were violent. She trusts me, for some reason. I push the slight feeling of guilt down and invite the feeling of freedom and naughtiness—the heady combination of feelings I get when I am deliberately breaking the rules. I head to the gas station, and inside, I select a 5<sup>th</sup> of vodka, but on second thought, I grab two, just in case. I pay the bill, and hide each bottle separately—one under the driver's seat, one in the back, under the covering where the spare tire is located. They will never look there! But just before I start up the car, I reach under the driver's seat, break the tab, and take a swig. It's like magic. My happy mood is restored. I can do this.

I peel out of the station, and head home. Everyone is sitting by the TV with Aunt: Larry, Susan, and Jake, who must have known I was gone and decided to come out. Jake is unrelenting in his anger at me, and I try to avoid him whenever possible. Though he is just 13, he is mean, and I have taken to locking my door to keep him from hitting me when he is angry. He is always angry, and I am the reason for it. I am not the mother he started with. There is no other excuse, no explanation. Alcoholism is not an excuse, and though I believe that, I can't seem to manage sobriety—that word again.

I have carried the bottle with me, and use their distraction to secret it under the bed. I have several boxes under there, but rather than put it in any of them, which I think might be a little obvious, I put it between two boxes. I love the sleek design and the clear liquid of vodka. I love that no one knows I am drinking it when I am drinking it. I take one more swig before placing it in its hiding place, and just in time. Larry comes in and says, “Hi, honey. It’s steak tonight? How are you? How do you feel?”

“Finally, someone is thinking of my welfare,” I reply. “I am great, honey. Aunt and I went shopping, and yeah, we’re having steak and potatoes and salad.”

“I smelled the potatoes when I came in,” he said, “I think it’s time to grill the steaks. I fired up the barbecue for you.”

Though he never helps cook, even letting me barbecue, he likes to start it— weird, but so is everything with him, and it irritates me, but I keep the irritation out of my voice and say, “Thanks, honey. I am getting right on that.”

Grilling steaks is not hard, even when you’re tipsy, and I concentrate on keeping my balance, and articulating my words so no one will suspect. The steaks come out slightly overdone, though. I miss having red wine with the steaks, but we are now a non-alcoholic household, so I fill water glasses for everyone before we sit to eat.

At dinner, Susan surprises me by saying, “I really hope you are going to stop drinking, Mom. I miss the old Mom.”

I feel a sudden rush of grief, and there are tears in my eyes. For a moment, I miss the old Mom too, but only for a moment. The old Mom spent her days with her mouth tightly closed, resisting, resisting, resisting. There were so many ways to make mistakes, it was inevitable that I would finally make the big one.

Oscar Wilde said that women always become like their mothers, and that's their tragedy. And men don't, and that's theirs. I wonder if Oscar loved his mom. I wonder if he would have loved my mom, if she were his, or me, if I were his.

I get up quickly from the table, and go into my room and shut the door and lock it. I reach under the bed and get the bottle of vodka and start drinking. I hear the voices of the others asking me if I'm all right.

"Go away!" I shout, slurring my words, a dead giveaway.

They start pounding on the door, and I know that they will remember the key hanging on the hook in the kitchen sooner or later, and I hear someone going to get it, so I gulp down the rest of the bottle, and store it empty back to its hiding place. I stretch out on the bed, and pick up a book from the bedside table. They all come hurriedly into the room, Larry holding the key, Aunt behind him, Susan behind her, Jake standing in the corridor.

"You've been drinking!" Larry says.

"No, I haven't!" I insist. "I just needed to rest after all the work today, walking around the grocery, making dinner. I just got out of the hospital, you know!"

Aunt has stopped by my side of the bed, staring at me, her face white with shock. "My God, you have never looked like her before!" Aunt puts her hands to her face. "You look just like your mother!"

I jump up and say sharply, "You know what that means to me!"

"I'm sorry, I can't help it--but you know I've seen her like this so many times!"

Larry is looking for the bottle. "Where did you hide it, Caitlin?" he asks.

“I am not drunk!” I insist, even though I know it’s obvious that I am. Susan turns around and walks away. Jake gives me one malevolent stare and walks away himself. Aunt sits on the bed and puts her arms around me.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” she says. “I am so sorry I couldn’t protect you. But you need to face this demon. You must try harder to stay sober. Your kids need you sober. We all do.”

Her words are irritating me now, and I want to say *where were YOU when I needed you, when there was no one to protect me, to make my mom stay sober*, but I know it’s not fair, I know she didn’t know, couldn’t realize, so I jump up off the bed, throw the book down, and run out of the room to the kitchen, Aunt following me. I stumble to the knife drawer and grab a knife, all the while feeling excited, almost exhilarated, as if I am getting away with something, being naughty, breaking the rules, being free. Aunt is grabbing me and trying to prevent me from using it, saying aloud, “No, not the knives, please, not the knives..., then screams LARRY!

I manage, even with Aunt trying to grab my arms from behind me, to get the knife’s edge next to my skin on my left wrist, and I push down hard, feeling the pain as a release, watching the blood seeping up, even as Larry appears and wrests the knife away. I am smiling in delight, can’t help it, the physical pain is so pleasurable. I hear some thrumming in my ears and begin to feel a little faint, but Larry catches me, and Aunt has somehow found a kitchen towel and tightly wraps it around my arm, still saying, “please, not the knives, not the knives...”

