

CONFESSIONS OF AN ALCOHOLIC HOUSEWIFE

Each day was a juggling act: take care of Max, write, clean house, cook. At 5pm, I'd grab a bottle of wine and reward myself for pulling off another day, even though I didn't feel like I was doing anything well.

Back in my yard, I drained my drink and rattled the ice cubes in the glass. Should I rein in my drinking or have another cocktail? I chuckled, got up off my lawn chair, walked into my house, and poured another drink.

For the next several years I threw great dinner/drinking parties, kept a stylish house, presented famous artists in Max's classroom, exercised like a demon, and embraced suburban motherhood and its cocktail circuit and wrote less and less.

Most of my friends were social drinkers, but most of my drinking was done at home. I stopped answering my phone after 8pm because I didn't want my friends knowing I was drunk on a Monday.

Almost every morning, I woke up with a hangover. I'd ease myself out of bed, tell myself I wasn't going to drink that day, go to the gym, sweat out the booze, and do whatever I had planned to do.

By three o'clock the hangover was gone and I'd plan dinner. I'd start cooking, watch the clock on the stove, and at 5pm I'd grab my martini shaker. After polishing off a couple of stiff ones, I'd sit down to dinner with my family and share a bottle of wine with my husband. While I cleaned up, I opened another bottle of wine. I'd help Max with his homework, put him to bed, pass out on the couch, and wake up at three in the morning to infomercials on TV. My life was ticking by. It was depressing.

When I was pregnant with Max I had stopped drinking, so I began thinking it might be a good idea to get pregnant again. Max would have a sibling, and I would quit getting drunk every night. I told my husband, Charlie, I wanted another child. I got pregnant and stopped drinking. I nursed Van for six months and halfway through began allowing myself a couple of glasses of wine per week.

A week after Van was weaned, Charlie and I flew to France. He and I enjoyed many bottles of wine there and, back at home, I slipped right back into my old drinking pattern. That pattern lasted for more than a year.

One weekend, after a Friday and Saturday night of heavy partying with friends, I woke up hurting bad and made the decision to get help for my alcoholism. I dragged myself to a recovery meeting Sunday morning and sat in the back of the room. The guy leading the meeting began yelling about how he hated his soon-to-be ex-wife and wished she was bleeding out in a gnarly car crash he'd just wit-

nessed. The meeting ended and a woman who admitted to being suicidal gave me her phone number and asked for mine. She told me she was my sponsor.

I was done with recovery meetings, I thought. But that night, at five o'clock, I was craving a drink like Pavlov's dog and went to a meeting instead of grabbing my martini shaker. We read a story out of a recovery book about a writer who loved throwing dinner parties and, after her guests left, drank the dregs of her guests' drinks. A couple of months earlier, I'd drunk my guests' dregs for the first time. I cringed.

A teenage boy said his mother would get tanked every evening, help his little brother with homework, get angry, and whip his brother's books on the floor. I'd had scenes like that with Max. I cringed again. I left that meeting feeling like I was in the right place and went to bed that night without a drink.

I began going to meetings in the evening when I'd normally be drinking. Sometimes the meetings agitated me, sometimes they rang my bell, sometimes they made me want to drink. I began trying to sniff out the normal women in recovery. But as soon as I found a good candidate, she'd speak at a meeting and tell a whoring story or a my-children-were-taken-away-from-me story and I'd scratch her off my potential-friend list.

Most of the stories I listened to in recovery were worse than mine and I began wondering if I really belonged there.

After a meeting where a one-eyed man wearing magnifying eyeglasses that emphasised his good eye ogled me the entire hour, I went to a bookstore and began scouring the recovery/addiction shelves for a book I could relate to. I didn't want to read about how low a person could go, I wanted verification that someone like me was a drunk and needed to stop drinking. I left the bookstore empty handed.

As I lay in bed that night, the thought, 'write that book', flew into my head. I bought a notebook the next day and kept a journal for 15 months chronicling the ups and downs of what it's like for a high-functioning alcoholic to get sober. I filled 10 notebooks, and those notebooks became 'Diary of an Alcoholic

'After polishing off a couple of stiff ones, I'd sit down to dinner with my family and share a bottle of wine with my husband'

Housewife', which was released in April.

Unlike alcoholics whose lives had gone down the toilet before they got help, I still had friends. But I was starting to have problems with my friends, especially my best drinking buddy, "Kelly". Kelly (the names of everyone except my family members were changed in 'Diary of an Alcoholic Housewife') wasn't happy I'd stopped drinking.

Kelly was pretty, charismatic, and fun to be around. We used to joke about growing old together and making sure our IVs were filled and dripping with Chardonnay. Kelly and her husband, Joel, were in the four-couple Bacchanal Dinner Club I started. Every few months, one of us would host a dinner/drinking party, and those parties were becoming difficult and tedious for me.

By the time we sat down to eat, everyone but me was wasted. I enjoyed talking to my friends for the first couple of hours, when we could have a decent conversation. But those conversations felt like work because I was trying to be funnier and wittier than my drinking self. I was terrified of becoming a tee-totaling dullard.

My sponsor (I had dumped the suicidal one and gotten a new one) kept advising me to stay away from my drinking friends and drinking situations. Everyone I listened to at meetings seemed to be avoiding exposure to alcohol like the plague, even if they'd been sober for years.

I wanted to be normal. I wanted to move about the world without drinking. I didn't want to focus on my alcoholism all the time. I didn't want to move through life in a sick recovery bubble that was in danger of being popped at any moment by a whiff of booze.

I continued to see my friends, but my invitations to drinking events were becoming fewer and fewer. I knew why. I didn't want to hang out with non-drinkers when I wanted to get wasted. But it bothered me. And Kelly was rubbing my nose in it.

I was experiencing firsts without alcohol in other situations as well. During the summer, I went to our lake cottage without a box filled with wine and vodka for the first time.

My father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Later that summer, my family spent a week with my parents at their north woods cabin. Spending a sober week with my parents was a challenge. As soon as I walked into the cabin, I wanted a drink. During the week, my father — an alcoholic, too — drove me in his boat past watering holes we'd gotten drunk at and enjoyed. "Remember when we had Bloody Marys there?" he asked. It killed me. Like clockwork, my father had his usual meltdown midweek.

I resisted screaming back at him, but

slapped money in front of him to pay for the extra food. My father raged that he was going to wipe his ass with my money.

One night, my father and I were sitting outside. "You don't know how it feels to have cancer, Brenda," he said. "I think about it all the time. I can't sleep. It keeps me up at night. I don't want to die. I don't want to leave you, the boys, your mother."

He went into the cabin to refresh his cocktail. I considered having a drink with him. Maybe it was the least I could do for a dying man. But I knew I'd go back to being drunk every night and hung over every morning.

When the summer was over, I flew to Budapest with Charlie. He was attending a conference and I accompanied him for fun. Before leaving, I contemplated drinking while I was overseas. What the hell, I can drink on vacation and get sober when I get back. I tortured myself for weeks wondering if it would be ok to temporarily suspend my sobriety. Eventually, I went to a meeting and admitted what was rocking around in my head. As the words were leaving my mouth, my anxiety dissipated and I knew I wasn't going to drink. It was miraculous.

Charlie and I cruised down the Danube River one night. Cocktails swirled, bands played, and Buda and Pest were lit up on either side. The warm wind blew through my hair and I was enormously happy to be alive, sober, and feeling everything. I wasn't a numbed-out zombie any more.

Back at home, I became heavily involved in my father's cancer treatment, which was often unappreciated by my mother, especially when I was trying to pry my dad away from a quack claiming to be the only doctor who could cure prostate cancer.

I thought life would become hugely boring when I got sober. I wasn't quitting drinking forever. I thought I'd give myself a year or so to get my drinking under control and start drinking again when sobriety got boring. But it never got boring.

Whenever I'm tempted to drink, I remind myself that normal drinkers don't get pregnant to stop drinking. And I think of my friend, Deidre, who went to jail for driving drunk and smashing her vehicle into a car with two teenage boys in it. The boys survived but were severely injured, and Deidre spent time in the clink for it. I'd driven in a blackout numerous times. I could have gone to jail, just like Deidre. That continues to scare me.

I can never drink safely again. If I drink, I'll be back where I started in a matter of time. And I don't want that. ❏

'Diary of an Alcoholic Housewife' by Brenda Wilhelmsen is now available on Amazon Kindle



‘It dawned on me that I was about to make the leap from **heavy drinker** into **alcoholic** while I was sitting in my backyard one summer night drinking a **vodka** on the rocks. My two-year-old son, **Max**, was asleep in his room, my husband was out with co-workers, and I was drinking **alone — again**’

— Brenda Wilhelmson

Brenda Wilhelmson: ‘I can never drink safely again’