

Hell in a Handbag

One woman.
Ninety days. Zero alcohol.
Easy...right?

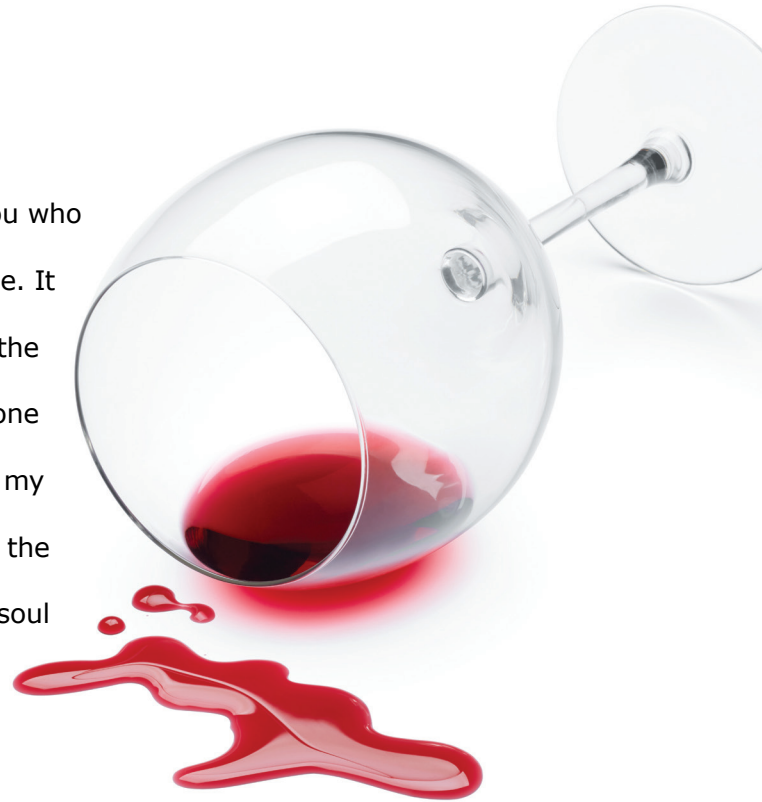


Rachel
Wilkinson

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This book is for those of you who
are able to have just one. It
may help you understand the
rest of us who know that one
is never enough. To you, my
wish is simple, may you find the
thing which soothes your soul
and brings you to a more
peaceful way of life.



Cheers

Rachel

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I'm hung-over. It's not a new experience. It's becoming quite a regular one, to be honest. I don't remember getting home and I have lost my car keys/house keys and my favourite silver cardigan. My handbag is full of fragments of shattered glass. We had all swiped a pint glass of Stella and mine didn't make it home. I do remember being slumped on some kind of picnic table outside a pub waiting for a taxi and discretely vomiting over my shoulder. It's coming back in waves of nausea and regret. I am a 45 year old mother of two, behaving like a teenager. I do remember standing at the front door, scrabbling through my handbag trying to find my keys and crying "I can't find anything," my friend beside me is saying, "It's ok, just ring the doorbell". My hands are bleeding as I feel around in the dark for the doorbell.

But it's not ok. It's never been ok.



I wake the next morning and follow the trail of clothes and jewellery to the bathroom and feel the familiar creep of shame coming back. I have an appointment to meet a friend in the city so I don't speak to anyone, I shower, dig out my spare car key, and flee.



Gimme some kinda sign, girl.

– Peter Andre



Intro

Peter Andre said it best when he sang *Gimme some kinda sign, girl*.

He may have asked with his shirt off, a six pack, a whiny, whiny, girl voice and some very dark fake tan but he brought the universal question home when he asked for a sign. We all want someone to tell us we are doing the right thing, we have made the right decision, we are headed on the right path. Even Peter Andre needed some clarification. He may not have been asking God, the universe or for anything more significant than to know if a girl liked him, but he made it pretty clear that he was asking for a sign.

I don't ask for signs, I think I live on a pretty straight path, I go where I want and I know what I want. Or do I? The other afternoon I had a car accident and of course, I started to analyse it as a metaphor for my life. I wondered if it was a sign? It was a three way collision. Again, I am over-thinking. I was pushed by a vehicle from behind into the car in front. All I can think at the time, is, it's ok, not my fault, I'm covered by insurance. I'm a little freaked out but I know I can be calm in a crisis, so let's just get off the road and sort this out. I count my blessings, my kids are not in the car, I'm not bleeding, and there is a form in my glove box telling me what to do in an accident. All is well.

The young guy in front gets out of his car and starts asking me what I was thinking, when I point behind me to the other guy pulling in behind me with the bigger car who pushed me into him. The young guy starts to take photos with his phone and I see my bumper bar has slightly pushed in his personalised plates. I walk around to the back to

take a look at my damage as the rear-ender man gets out and apologises, saying "It's all my fault, I'm sorry." I nod, I know. "It's ok I say to him. I've got a form to get our details."

He takes the form and says "Aren't you jinxing yourself, by having this in your car?" I think, well don't you need to be prepared for anything? I wonder again if this is a metaphor for my life, a three-way collision. A life I'm uncertain I want anymore, a career I have outgrown, a chance to reassess. He asks me to wait while he phones his wife to find out who his insurer is. I laugh. He gets off the phone and says that his wife called him a dickhead. We all seem to agree.

Somehow, it's ok, almost a disappointment, no dramas, no shouting. No police. Everyone calmly exchanges details. The guy I hit realises he hasn't got much damage; the guy who hit me hardly has a dint. I am in the middle with the back of my car crushed, my groceries held hostage in the back with my disused yoga-mat. My teeth rattle in my skull and a twenty year old whiplash injury is on my mind. It's not the first time this has happened.

The last time was over 20 years ago when I was saving up to go overseas. I was travelling across the Sydney Harbour bridge, heading for the tunnel in my flatmate's car, at the last minute we decided the tunnel freaked us out so we changed lanes too quickly in front of another car. We were tired and hung-over from spending the night with our friend on the North Shore and I probably shouldn't have been driving her car.

The crash meant that my travel plans were halted for another six months while I paid her mother for damages. I think it also was a sign to slow down, to take my time, hit cruise control and watch myself. I had been living in a pretty unconscious way, staying in a relationship with no future and a job with no possibility of progression. If it wasn't for the car accident, my life would have taken a completely different course from the one it did. I would have arrived in London too soon for the person who was waiting for me. Another story, for another time. When I told someone I met my future partner on the same day I flew into London, they asked me was he holding a sign. It would have been a waste of time for him. Seems I don't look for them anyway. Life just happens and pulls me on the path it wants me to go.

So a few weeks after this second accident, I've filed my claim, been to the wreckers, had a massage, visited the Doctor and she confirms that I have whiplash again. I start to metaphorically think about the collision, the meaning of it, how it happened. I was just humming along the same path I always take, being blasé, listening to music not thinking. I start to really take a closer look at my life, where I am headed. Why am I being forced to take stock now? What's coming up in my life I need to prepare for? What is my next step, God? Universe? Peter Andre?

This time I know. I knew before the accident. I'm on to you, life, I'm not 20 anymore. It's time to stop kidding myself. I get it. I know. It's a sign.

I am in the second year of my Diploma of Counselling. In order to meet my course requirement I need to have 100 hours placement in a counselling centre or community group. I managed to meet with and secure voluntary work at a healing centre. Georgia, the main counsellor, assigns me tasks and I contact therapists to organise a retreat. As part of the job, we check in with each other, share cups of tea and chat.

A week after the accident, I met up with some girlfriends for a drink. I am stressed, my marriage was strained, I did what I usually do in order to cope: binge drink. The Monday when I arrive at the centre, the counsellor asks how I am. I tell her the truth. I am swimming in a thick morose of self pity and alcohol withdrawal, and when she calls me a fucking addict and I finally can hear this. I know it's time to see this life, this cycle, this destruction and address it. So I sit sobbing and squeezing snot-filled, tear-soaked tissues into wet lumps in my hands, and in this moment of shame, I want to stop this.

I don't tell anyone I've stopped drinking and I'm seriously contemplating never drinking again, until about day 13. By now I've gone a week with the aftertaste still in my mouth, I'm taking bush flower remedy drops for my car crash/marriage crisis and I'm struggling to hold it together.

I had never thought about ending the cycle before. I was a middle aged mother of two carrying on like a teenage binge drinker.

This is my account of the 90 days I went through in search for a more improved and healthier life. I'm publishing this 90 day journal in the hope it may be helpful for individuals and families dealing with addiction.



Day 1

Are you fucking kidding me? What am I agreeing to? Accountability?

Every day I have to show up, ring up, turn up and get counselled? I don't have the time! I am lucky to be able to come here once a week, I can't do every day for 30 days. What the fuck am I agreeing to here? I'm not an alcoholic. I don't drink every day. I am sobbing on a lounge with my counsellor, and she has promised that I can help her write a book if start with a 30 day no alcohol thing.

Who can do 30 days? What the hell?

She has no idea that I will do this; she tells me I have to call her every day because I might be craving or renegeing. I don't renege on a challenge. I'm up for this and I am so doing it.

Just you watch me.

Day 2

What the hell am I doing? Have you any idea how stressful my life is? I need alcohol. There is a bottle of champagne in my fridge and I see it 15 times a day when I open the door. I see it and I want it. In my mind I see the movies where the alkie's or their family are throwing the whiskey down the sink and I think, what a waste! I give the champagne to my neighbour and clear the crystal flutes to a higher shelf of the cupboard. I make more room for the drinking glasses.

I text my drinking buddy down the street with the bad news. "Hey!" (I try to keep it light), "you know I'm going to do a 30 day booze free stint, do you think we can still be friends?" She texts back in a heartbeat "Definitely not." I reply, "I thought as much."

I try the coffee angle; she tells me coffee doesn't go with beer. I convince her that I am serious about it and she "LOLs" me. She was part of my last binge session where we decided eating was cheating and for some reason we needed to steal pint glasses. She was holding me up at the front door, whilst I cut my fingers and hand scrabbling around in my handbag for my keys. I found them two days later in my other handbag; I hadn't taken them with me after all. I wonder if I will see much of her over the next few months. I hope so.

Day 3

I'm writing, writing, writing, staying home with my daughter who has a cold. I have only gotten up from my laptop to take her to the doctor. I am writing, writing, writing; I've got so much to say. I'm banging out words and thoughts, theories, recollections and ruminations.

Day 4

I'm a bit depressed about the possible outcome of this. Will I ever be able to drink again? Is this process a forever thing? Am I done with crisp pale ale, magically bubbling champagne and a tall glass of vodka and lime? Can I ever go to the races again? A wedding, a concert, a festival, a live gig? How can I bear it?

I think about how good it would be if my memory returned and my skin became clearer and I lost weight. I think about being really present in my job, my life, my family and not off with friends, joy chasing.

I think about how self centred I have been for so many years and how much money I have spent. I'm scared. I'm afraid I will become a born-again non-drinker, some kind of bar-stool evangelist. Shouting out to patrons, "Put that drink down! Don't you know

what it's costing you? It's costing you your life, your family, your job, your friends, your future!" I worry that I will replace my love for booze with a vengeance to save others from it.

Who am I without alcohol anyway?

Day 5

Oh yes, Friday. A tricky one and a long weekend. Old habits die hard and this afternoon, they are writhing in agony. I self soothe. I rub my hands up and down my thighs, I am wearing shiny tracks in my trousers. I wring my hands. I eat. I think about coffee. I eat again.

I go to see Georgia my counsellor and we talk about it. I say, "I can't think of a long weekend without booze. That's three days. That's what they are for – an extra day to recover!" She tells me "We just do today".

I look at her astonished. Then it occurs to me. "Are you my fucking sponsor?" I ask. "Do I get a bloody medal at the end of this? Am I in AA? Do we have to say the serenity prayer together? I am not an alcoholic!" I scream, and not for the first time.

"That's the initial part," she laughs. "Denial."

We talk about all my nerve endings being raw and on edge, screaming out for the buzz. I want, I want. I admit I could have sex with anyone or anything. I'm horny. Pining. Craving. I feel like humping the edge of the table. She tells me I can masturbate as much as I want. I laugh. "I'm Catholic," I say, "we don't do that, and besides, that wouldn't be very social." She explains to me that I can choose any healthy addiction over an unhealthy addiction.

Day 6

If I run, I feel well, healthy, strong. If I eat well, I feel vibrant, energetic and motivated. Today I visit my brother and sister-in-law. They tell me how great I look and that I look younger and fresher. I tell them I am off alcohol for a bit. I'm excited for them about having their baby in a week. I look at their nursery, their baby things and I'm so happy

for the new life and preciousness. I cannot tell them I've hit middle age and I have a drinking problem and I'm leaving my husband, not when they are so young and shiny and happy.

Day 7

I don't run today. I buy a desk to set up my study. I glance at my assignment. I eat at odd times. Late breakfast, late lunch, bread, pasta. I have no patience for the kids fighting and bickering. I'm irritated. My husband is tinkering around fixing taps and making sharp, metallic, clanking noises. I isolate myself because I hate everyone.



Days 8 to 14

I tell people at work. We laugh about how insane I am, but people begin to notice calmness.

I go to yoga, I meditate, I speak with Georgia, I write, I word purge, word vomit. I feel ok. I know I'm obsessing about it. It helps if I run. I am concerned about going to my sister's 50th birthday; then I realise that I know everyone there – my family and my sister's friends – and I normally drink to feel confident and funny. I realise for the five years I have been at work, all my work friends think I am confident and funny. Why do I need to drink?

I take my V8 veggie juice to the party. No-one thinks it is weird I am not drinking. They hardly notice. I drive in as I live 20km from my sister, so the driving gives me an excuse.

I sit with my dad and chat with him about sobriety, and we talk about his dad drinking and being absent in his youth. He was based in Japan during the war and later drank because of the consequences of that period. We speak about my dad's upcoming trip with my brother to Japan, to track all the places his father was based.

I begin to wonder if my grandfather died of alcoholism and not dementia. Was the dementia caused by alcoholism? He was in a nursing home and he wasn't very old and he couldn't talk. I'd never really thought about it much before. I knew he drank and was violent to my Nanna and the kids. In the nursing home he was mute, with sunken cheeks where his teeth used to be, a beanie and a haunted look. The photos I saw later, of a strong, young, fit man in an army uniform were hardly recognisable.

I speak to a friend of my sister; she is quite interested in my venture into sobriety. She had an alcoholic friend who she cut off due to his addiction. She tells me he didn't speak to her for a year after she told him he was going to kill himself. He finally gave up and got back in touch with her. I tell her I'm going to write about it and she asks for my blog address. Later, she posts articles to Facebook that she finds on the brain, addiction, binge drinking and I feel supported by her, in a virtual way. I love that she can see what I am doing is not just for me, but for my kids, for my family and for my friends. I'm trying to dig down to find the better person underneath.

At about 9.30pm the party is stepping up a notch: the cake has been cut and we've sung happy birthday. I've hung out with my niece and her husband, I'm happy, I'm tired and I leave. It does feel weird to leave a party early and not be the one joining a cab line at 2 am. I'm uncertain about how to leave, and I make overly apologetic excuses about how I'd like to stay, but I drove in. I don't know how to leave a party early, or sober. I kiss my parents and go. Not once in my memory have I ever left a party before my parents! When they leave it usually signifies the start of the night.

I feel great driving home in full consciousness and awareness that I will not be hung-over tomorrow. I survived my first party and I coped without alcohol. I crank up the music in my car and sing along. I think the biggest challenge is going to be a weekend in Sydney with my girlfriend in a week. But for now, I do one day at a time. (Sweet Jesus...)

Sigh. I feel like a country song. Except I left the darn thing behind, by choice. Alcohol didn't leave me.

Day 14

I'm planning a birthday party for my seven year old. I realise when I sent the invites out a month ago I scheduled it for 2pm, thinking that the day after my sister's 50th I would be very unwell. Here I am, at 11 am, all ready – I've been for a run, cleaned the house and I'm setting out the lollies. I leave the fairy bread until later. I make us all sandwiches and we are ready way too early so I decide to get the girls out of the house for a walk.

We go for an hour, I'm thinking about the chocolate mud cake, the white bread and all the different lollies we had foraged for the day before. I come home, munch on lollies and party pies all afternoon while the kids dance, play, unwrap parcels and play musical statues. As they are running their own show, I sit down and pick at the fairy bread and more lollies. By the time everyone leaves, I am worn out. I am bloated and fat. I finish off a few more sausage rolls, then feel like lying down. While I'm nursing my sugar low, I feel depressed, fat, unmotivated and guilty. I know I shouldn't have eaten all that party food. I know I should be doing an assignment. I can't get up. I feel revolting. I force myself to have a shower. I'm trying to motivate myself somehow. I have to get my assignment started as I am away next weekend and it is due in a week.

I weigh myself, I stand side on to look at my fat stomach in the mirror and I shower. Once I am in the shower, I feel nauseous and I vomit. I stand there looking at the brown vomit swirling down the drain and I notice that I am thinking it is chocolate cake and then I think, "What the fuck – am I bulimic now? Have I replaced my alcohol addiction with food?"

I see myself hours before, dropping a party pie from the fridge almost to the floor and catching it, and eating it. I see myself crouched in front of the fridge hiding and eating and I see myself as a dirty, fat, binger. I'm eating to fill the emptiness, the sadness, the loneliness.



Days 15 to 21

I text my best friend during the week and we make plans for the upcoming weekend. I'm now 16 days in, according to the official commencement but 26 from the actual day I stopped drinking. I'm past the habit thing of 21 days.

It has rained for a week so I haven't run; instead, in the mornings I've started dropping out of bed straight into push-ups. I continue my weekly yoga, I make some brown rice concoction with spinach and olives and tuna and begin to feel good about food again. I book an appointment with a kinesiologist. I speak with my counsellor about my shameful bulimia moment; she tells me I just had a sugar binge. I don't tend to do things in halves, so I learned my lesson there. She tells me, this is what addicts do. She takes me through a meditation and I relax and stop being so hard on myself.

My girlfriend texts me back scheduling in a lunch with our friend on Friday and a dinner on Saturday in Sydney. I tell her I'm not drinking; she asks if we could just have a small bottle of wine? I'm not sure she really understands that I'm *not* drinking. I'm still anxious it might have to be forever.

I feel great. I somehow have more time, more ideas, different and better ways of thinking. I had an idea come to me in a work meeting, and suggested it. My two colleagues and boss exchanged glances and I could tell that they thought it was a good idea, and it was. They are used to me zoning out in meetings and muttering critical or negative remarks. I was still thinking, where did that come from? The idea came quickly and clearly and impressed us all. This has continued. I feel like I'm replacing some brain cells or there's not as much fog in my mind

anymore. My skin looks good, I have lost a few kilos, and my stomach bloat is gone. I fit into my winter trousers with some room to spare.

I fly to Sydney. I worry about seeing my friend, passing the bars where we used to drink, being in the same streets, and the hum and vibrancy of the city might bring back the pull towards a mighty thirst. We go to lunch. I sit with my two girlfriends and we talk about the non-drinking over green tea. *My green tea, really*; one friend orders chardonnay and the other has an Asahi. I used to love Asahi. It goes perfectly with Japanese. We laugh about the night we had dinner in Newtown at a Japanese restaurant and drank Asahi. We both had short hair and it looked like we were on a date. I look at the amber liquid in the glass. I don't want it, but yet I still appreciate the beauty.

I expected the girls to place a drink in front of me and tell me to get over myself. They don't. I watch them being respectful, questioning my motivations and inquiring about how I was feeling. I observe them behave the way I do around vegetarians at a BBQ. Is it ok if I drink? I hope you don't think I am being insensitive? I would like to have another drink, are you ok with that? I'm not judging them, I'm not allergic, I'm not going to leave the table if my friends do what they always do, I'm the one that has changed. I'm not imposing my beliefs on them.

To my surprise, they beautifully and respectfully care about me not drinking. As we leave the Japanese restaurant, I notice my friend had only drunk half of her wine. That was a surprise. That wouldn't have happened to me, not in a thousand years. It was hard to see this. I argue with my mind on this one; why am I not drinking and she chooses to leave hers behind? I am here struggling not to have any and she chooses to leave hers unfinished? "What a waste..." I mutter to myself as I walk out of the restaurant. I can't say I didn't imagine what it would be like to walk back to the table, pick it up and drain it in one gulp. I've only once or twice had an out-of-body experience where I watched myself do something, and this was one. And I don't actually like Chardonnay.

Over the weekend I notice over the dinners, lunches, stories - it feels no different. I am with my friends, reminiscing about things we used to do together, a memorable Melbourne trip which we always end up laughing about where we were drunk and stupid.

Quotes we are in hysterics about that only we understand. We speak of mutual friends, planned holidays, work, family. Nothing is any different except that I am drinking water or green tea, so I need to know where the bathrooms were, because I pee a lot.

In the morning, I am the winner because on our run, I felt awesome. My friend pushed me to go two kilometres further than normal and I did it! I tire early, looking for bed around 9.30pm while they stay up later, fuelled by booze. I like my sleep.

Days 22 – 29

I come back home and I still feel great – energised, happy, and well. I run, I go to yoga, I write, I finish off my assignment. I feel organised, I feel relaxed. I feel psyched. I plan school holiday activities for the girls; I book a haircut and a massage. I see Georgia, my counsellor, I tell her how great I feel and she asks me if there are any other emotions coming up. I say, no, all good. I still don't think I am an addict or an alcoholic.

Georgia asks me to write down my triggers. They used to be work. Now they are:

- Boredom
- Being alone
- No projects to do
- Cooking pasta
- Hot afternoons craving a cool beer
- Being with old drinking buddies
- Watching my children fight be quiet or sad
- Locking the doors at night, going through the ritual of locking up alone



Today, it hits me, I wake and shower and cry. I am struck by grief. There is no other word to explain it. I don't understand why, but in the shower I am overcome by sadness and sob my heart out. I feel like someone has died, like a good friend or a lover. I ache with sadness.

I continue my day and the sadness lingers. I sometimes find my eyes welling with tears. I wonder if it's all the herbal tea and water trying to make its way out of my body. I wonder if it's the crazy hormones that have been on hold for months. I wonder if it's the pill my doctor has put me on because my period stopped after the car accident. She said the oestrogen will balance me out. I'm not balanced. I'm teetering. I'm on the edge of a swamp and I am being drawn into the quagmire. I'm feeling like I'm wallowing in something. I'm thinking about this 90 day thing may not be an experiment or a trial after all – it may be a lifestyle change. I'm in too deep now to find my way out.

When Georgia told me I may never be able to drink again, I wondered what she was playing at. I look at her directly, challenging her. "You never said that when I decided this," I glare. My anger swells. "What the fuck do you mean, I may not be able to drink again?" I make a sweeping gesture with my hand. "I'm lining up shot glasses on a long bar when this is over!" I've seen this bar. It's a very long bar at The Regatta in Toowong. Line up those cock sucking cowboys - here comes Mamma!

Georgia just holds my stare. "You may not be able to drink again for a few years," she tells me. "If I told you that a month ago, would you have done it?"



I shudder. No fucking way. I watch my social life disappear. I see the photos in my mind flicking like they are all falling out of a photo album: the races, black tie

functions, weddings, a bbq – there they all go. The fun times, the happy weekends, the sunshiny afternoons with beers and champagne, the birthdays. Falling like confetti to the ground. Gone.

I wonder if I will have any friends left at the end.

I try to boost my spirits by congratulating myself on social media. I've already tentatively shared a blog about it on Facebook, but not everyone has time to read 1000 word posts, so I mention it in a paragraph. I get some virtual high fives and some "good on you!" I can see my friends surfing their news feeds, glass of wine or a beer in hand, thinking "She is nuts. This won't last."

I know most of them wouldn't do it, nor need to, and then I see a post from a friend I haven't heard from in a while. He tells me he is two days from a year of no booze. I am amazed: one, that he would quit drinking, although he is very authentic; and two, that he would be brave enough to say in public that he thinks though it's legal, alcohol is a dangerous drug.

Another friend posts that he did three, five and six months no booze. I am astonished, as he was a big drinker; it's often his voice in my head when I think of our binge-drinking days. I hear "Your round, Battler," or, "Let's just duck up to Duke's Head for last drinks." We spent many nights together in London and Sydney drinking. I couldn't tally how much alcohol we've imbibed over the years, but it would be in the range of a bespoke winery.

I am so impressed. I ask if he still had any friends. He replies that he still went out and everyone else got pissed and didn't even notice he wasn't drinking. I feel hopeful. I feel grateful. But fuck, I feel like beer today.

My daughter ate too much sugar this afternoon; she is an addict in the making. She screams and cries and I am busy working on a project with my sister so I let her have the chocolate biscuits she brought over. I knew I would pay for it later, but I needed to buy the time so that I could get my counselling session filmed. We keep making mistakes, and the whole 20 minute session ends up being filmed upside down on my iPhone. It is a long day; the session is on relationships and finding the right one. My sister is 50 and looking for a life partner. I am 45 and leaving mine. I watch her play

it out and I practice all the things I am meant to say to her. I look at her and think, will this be me in five years? Will I be seeing someone about my inability to sustain a relationship? I push through the feelings, swallow them down; this is about her. I focus.

After she leaves, I fight with Ellie. She tells me I am the *meanest mum ever* for not giving her more biscuits; I tell her I have had it with her sugar and screaming. I feed my eldest daughter while Ellie sobs. I lock myself in the bathroom and scream. I want a drink! Fuck. She pushes my buttons. It's the whining, crying, screaming that undoes me. I make her food, which she doesn't eat in protest. I put my eldest daughter in the shower and scoop Ellie up in a blanket and hold her to me as we sob, both of us. She looks at me as I am crying and there is nowhere to hide. I am sad, she is sad. We may as well be this together. She stops crying and we laugh.



Days 38 to 45

Today, I grocery shop. I buy a lot of Mexican stuff: salsa, black beans, pulled pork, chillies, taco boats, lettuce, and tomato. I add bananas, avocados, potatoes, rice crackers, quinoa, brown rice, broccoli, Lebanese bread, Turkish bread, gluten free bread to my trolley. I buy baked beans, Mexican beans, fiery hot beans, butter beans, and soup: Thai soup, corn soup, pho, noodles, pasta, and spaghetti. I buy BBQ chicken, chicken wings, ham and hot salami, cheese, sour cream, yoghurt. I buy until I run out of energy. The pantry is heaving with boxes and packets. The fridge is full and needs to be rearranged. Dips are balancing on eggs, and chillies on cheese and sour cream teetering on yoghurt tubs. It's like I am waiting for Armageddon. There is too much food.

I'm worried about myself. I know I am trying to fill up the hole. I know I'm trying to fill up the emptiness. In the space of six weeks I have tried my hand at bulimia and hoarding; I've been an obsessive compulsive clothes washer. I've run five mornings in a row; I've become a competitive yogi, a social media slut, a herbal tea connoisseur. Now I'm an Armageddon grocery shopper. But I have slept. Oh, have I slept! Sometimes I've woken in what I thought was the dead of night to discover, quite smugly, it is 6am!

I am happy, I am healthy, I am not in danger of joining a new religion, or becoming an evangelist, preaching the joys of sobriety. My skin looks good and clear, my eyes are white and pretty. I still am somewhat neurotic, but that has always been the case, drunk or sober. I am meeting myself, and I quite like me.

Days 45 – 55

I've taken to pouring large wine glasses full of gorgeous juice blends like cranberry and pomegranate while I'm cooking dinner. It makes me feel human. I'm studying; I have assignments to do, and I'm tallying up the hours of my voluntary work, counting how many weeks I have left to do my final presentation. I chose to do a research paper on alcoholism. A fine idea, until I was faced with it every day, then had to research, write up findings and interview alcoholics. My friend and I also decided to attend an AA meeting, as well as an Al-Anon meeting for families and loved ones of alcoholics.

I pull up outside the community centre and cannot get the nerve up to get out of the car. I sit there, thinking, "What if someone sees me walking in?"

"What if I get to the door and my friend isn't here and they think I'm an alcoholic?"

"What if I am so nervous I can't speak?"

"Where even is the door?"

My friend pulls up beside me just as I am thinking of fleeing. I get out of the car, walk with her into the small community centre at the back of the library. We find the back door together. My friend hardly drinks, so for her, it's like she is just visiting; for me, it's a little more confronting. My biggest fear is that someone I know might be in the room. Someone who is a parent at my children's school, or a friend, or someone who I know from work. I take a deep breath as we approach the door. She slides the glass door open and shyly peeks in. A large man yells, "ONLY ALKIES IN HERE!"

My friend introduces us as students, and I feel relief wash over me. The meeting is beautiful. I feel like I belong, like the group trusted us. They all share their stories, veiled with humour but underneath we can sense the trauma. I realise they are all just people, with stories, people trying to be better.



Days 55 to 65

I am busy at work, trying to get everything completed so I can spend two days out of the office at a conference on the coast. I'm chasing up artwork, sending off ads. I am preoccupied, but also a little nervous about attending a conference sober. I have been to these conferences a few times, and as much as they deliver stunning speakers and inspired sessions, the social aspect of the event is always a highlight. Fabulous food, familiar faces, free booze and of course, industry gossip: who has left, who has moved somewhere else, who is sleeping with whom. There are a few groups of people I look forward to catching up with every time, plus it's also a good chance to see suppliers, too. I will be rooming with my work bestie.

We arrive at the conference and unpack, getting ready for our first session. Because it's held in Queensland, the conference has a tropical theme; there are inflatable whales, flamingos, fish, beach balls and pineapples dangling from the conference room ceiling. I take out my notepad and scribble a note to my friend, "That flamingo is so mine..." She draws a sad face and tells me I am naughty. I notice that an Olympian is the keynote speaker and I am pleased, as he is quite gorgeous and I still have a little crush on him from the last conference.

I line up next to him at lunch, and although he makes me nervous I gather up the courage to introduce myself. I make small talk about the food, then tell him I live in the same suburb he used to live. We talk about the bayside, and I remember that his wife and I shared the same obstetrician years ago when I was pregnant, so we talk about children and how old his are and where his family live now, he tells me about the school and how much they all love it there. I am impressed with myself; I just spoke with someone famous, sober. How courageous is that?

Later at the formal dinner, we dress up, and the bar staff circulate handing out champagnes. I ask for an apple juice in a champagne glass. The waitress does not bat an eyelid but returns with my drink standing proud on a little white doily on a tray. I chat, laugh, mingle and enjoy the pre-drinks. After dinner, I set the challenge for our table between the Eastern and Western schools to see who can smuggle the most inflatable decorations back to their room. I am constantly leaving the table, swiping flamingos and fish from the ceiling, snapping their fishing line strings, hiding them under my coat and then deflating them.

At one stage I have a deflated flamingo in my handbag on the table. I position it so that its beak is sticking out. I watch the decorations disappear one by one: the big orca suddenly gone, fish go missing, and I am in fits of giggles as I deflate a large tree in the toilets. My boss looks at my friend when I come back smirking, barely concealing a large palm tree behind my back. "God, she must be drunk".

"No," my friend says, laughing. "She hasn't had a drink in months!"

The next morning, I lose the bet, and as we are coming back into the conference room, I overhear the Olympian say to one of the organisers, "Did you get the decorations back?" I turn, head back to the room and bring down 11 deflated aquatic creatures and plants. I tell them that I just found them in my room. They take them, perplexed, along with 22 deflated items from my friend from the Western school.

One sober conference - done.

Days 65 - 70

I'm still a little unhinged, rudderless, sad. I know this is normal, this is life, this is expected. I remind myself I'm going through a marriage breakup. It feels to me like it is taking so long for him to move out. He is back and forth and not home and not talking to me, and I want some movement, some direction some indication that he is making plans to go. I discuss the timing of it all, and ask when we will tell the kids. He says he has changed his mind. I ask what he has changed his mind about - is it when we tell the kids?

He says he has changed his mind about the breakup.

I am furious. I immediately cross my arms and fume. I had exit plans; I am seeing two counsellors, a kinesiologist, a massage therapist, an aromatherapist, an acupuncturist. This breakup is costing me a lot of money to work through. He now tells me he doesn't want to break up. I don't understand. Instead of asking him, I consult with a few of my friends. We decide we don't understand, either, as he hasn't turned all kind and romantic on me at all. He is actually being mean and resentful and making me more determined to finish this.

He and I talk about it in bed. Really, I ambush him two nights later and continue the conversation about what he would be prepared to compromise on in order to stay. I will not stay if nothing changes. He won't compromise on work or travel; he denies this has any significant impact on me at all. I remind him that it makes him tired, unavailable to us and disconnected from me. Sadly, I believe it is the only way he can survive marriage, by being away from us.

I ask again, what he is prepared to bring to the table. I want him to think about how emotionally and physically deserted I feel. He implies it is my fault, as I don't watch TV with him anymore. I hate mindless TV and would prefer a book. I've also been studying. I asked him how it would be if we talked instead. Silence. Deafening.

For the next few days I wake to find he has left, not kissed me and not left me a half made coffee, like he has done every morning for 10 years. I figure that is a fair result. I phone him and leave a message where I apologise for being hurtful. I'm not trying to save the marriage but I am aware of how cruel it sounds, asking him to go.

I wonder what he was playing at deciding he wanted to stay, when I was offering him no incentive and he had no intention of changing anything. I want to know. I can't ask. I don't know how to ask why someone wants to stay with me when I have just ripped out their soul. I assume it is about the kids, or finances or property or something. He doesn't love me anymore. I can see it in his eyes.



Days 70 to 80

He leaves on day 77. I eat lollies. I don't run. I'm too emotional. I am tired of running and crying. I shower three times a day. I am bereft. I reach out on Facebook to my friends from my course, to tell them what's happening and I get some lovely words. I don't want words anymore, I want hugs. I want company.

I go see my friend in our street who knows all about my heartache, my sobriety, my story. We drink tea. I'm sick to fucking death of tea. I want to escape my life for a bit. I want to run away on my own. I want someone else to be responsible for my children. I think about planning a Melbourne trip. I want to shop and buy ridiculous cakes and clothing I don't need, with money I don't even know if I have anymore. Because running away solves things.

I think about the reality that I may need a better paying job. Or, after I have finished studying, I need to offer counselling on the weekends. I realise I need to be together and sorted first, before I can help anyone else. I'm falling apart a little and it's so scary to do it sober. Tears drop down my cheeks and I know I can do this, but I realise it's a path I have to walk on my own. Although I have lots of friends and support, I need to make all the decisions.

Sobriety is so fucking emotional. When someone looks at me or cares about me or says a kind word, I fall apart like a chastised child. It's so confronting to be vulnerable, to be seen. I feel so naked without my suit of armour. I am like a boiled egg, the shell taken off. I am not used to this softness, this rawness, this nerve-whistling coldness of exposure. I always pictured myself as skinless. Every emotion, feeling, situation gets

to me. Now I realise that alcohol was my armour, my leather jacket, my thick skin protecting me from the harshness and brutality of the world.

I'm sick of crying. Now that I don't have alcohol as a crutch and I can't have those 3am conversations with people, I have to say things sober, sometimes in the middle of the day. And sometimes I have to ask for my needs to be met; not everyone can quite understand that. I ask my daughter, "Could you just sit with me for a bit? I'm feeling lonely." I get a look that says "Seriously, Mum?" I make her sit beside me sometimes by holding her down. I text a friend saying that I feel needy and insecure. She responded, "You always seem so together, what could you possibly need? "

I don't tell her I need a lawyer, a hug, a meal without brown rice and vegetables in it, some company while I watch TV at night and someone to stroke my forehead until I fall asleep. I need a blacksmith to fashion me a coat of armour. Everything is seeping in and hurting me. I feel like I can't protect myself from life anymore.

It comes in waves, screeching highs and howling lows. Success followed by disappointment. I follow the wave of life in a confused and uncomprehending way, as it pulls and rolls and rocks me in its wake. I try to remember life has its own plans for me; I just have to hang on for the ride.

I continue to meditate when I can't sleep. I'm sick of the droning, melodic, polite, British voice lulling me back to sleep, but I know if I don't put the phone under my pillow with the app talking to me I will lay awake for the next two hours worrying about being awake. I meditate going to sleep, upon waking and sometimes in the middle of the night. I need the rest. My children sometimes listen to him too. One night we all meditate.

I'm tired of trying to be everything for everyone. I cancel things; I can't show up to functions and events. I'm feeling overwhelmed. It's too much. I'm busy at work and at home. My husband is moving out, buying furniture, being gone all the time. I am pressured to finish my presentation and mind the kids. I am beginning to understand what it feels like to be a single parent and it's exhausting. I print out my final assignment questions, terrified at the length of it but grateful that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. My two year Holistic Counselling diploma is coming to an end,

along with my 10 year marriage. Two things finishing and me unravelling along with it. Throw me in to the messy mix as well.

I go to a work meeting where my boss looks at me and says, "Are you still doing it?"

I say, "Yep. 78 days now, nearly there!"

He shakes his head, we have often talked about wine together, he has a penchant for a good red. "You look so amazing, your eyes are sparkling, your skin is glowing. When I talk to you, it's like I'm talking to a reformed alcoholic."

I look down; I don't know what to say. *Am I?* I think to myself. "Well, I just might be."

He shakes his head in amazement; I can tell he is not sure what to say now. I leave the office before he can see the tears in my eyes.

That afternoon I get an email from one of my favourite staff members. She says, "I just want you to know you are amazing and creative and unique." We have just worked on a campaign together featuring photos of students and teachers, and she was one of the teachers. I well up and cry. I have never felt so peeled back and exposed. My insides are on the outside. I'm raw, pure emotion. I laugh at the irony of all the booze I have poured in my body over the years to suppress my emotions, is now flooding out of me in tears.

Before I used to think I wasn't good enough, rich enough, interesting enough, smart enough, tall enough, worthy enough, beautiful enough. I am now discovering I am all of these things. It is a shock to uncover this conspiracy. Alcohol fuelled my feelings of insecurity, even though it made me feel brave and sassy and fearless - I was already all of those things. I had swallowed a lot of beliefs with every vodka, lime and soda, a lot of untruths, which became my negative companions, the chatter in my head.

"Three vodka lime and sodas please in a tall glass." *You will never be successful.*

"Two champagnes thanks." *You will never be tall, blonde and beautiful with a flat stomach.*

"Four espresso martinis." *You will never run your own business, you will always work for someone else.*

"Six Amstels, two Stellas and four shots of cow-sucking cock boys." *How could anyone love you if you don't love yourself?*



Days 80 to 90

It's late in the race to 90 days – day 88 seems to go on forever.

I start with a run. I am coming up a hill, thinking about how I've been trying to visualise my heart outside my body for a few months. Studying counselling, I learned how to really listen to people, and open my heart and body to be available and present. Lately I have been visualising my heart outside my body just in front of my chest when I approach people or when they are talking to me so that I can feel that I am present for them and care about them. I have been doing this on my runs as well: dogs pull at their leashes to lick me, and strangers greet me with wide smiles.

I turn up a slow bend and brace myself for the small hill by putting my head down and pushing against the light breeze. I watch my heart outside my body. I see it red and shiny, a love-heart shape. I breathe in and push on. My heart falls back into my body with a *whump*. I am in shock. I am winded. I am surprised. I sob at the emotion of it. I realise I have pulled my heart out of my body and given it to everyone else. I put their needs first: I listen to them, I love them, I help them. I have left my body heartless for years.

I stop running and I hold the place where my heart is and I realise that if I don't love me – if I don't put me first – I can't love anyone. It is a profound moment for me and stills me. As the realisation sinks in, I walk and shake my head. After a few moments I slap myself on the bum to gee myself up and continue running. In AA there is something on the 12 steps about an epiphany. That was mine.

I realise my heart has come home and there is no one who needs it more than me.

I tell Georgia about the revelation of the heart. She is always thrilled when I work this shit out for myself. She asks me to tell her about the woman I was three months ago and how I felt. I tell her I was angry, resentful, tired, overwhelmed, and lonely. She asks me how I felt two months ago, I told her I was still angry, sad, tired but well on my way to feeling brilliant. She asks me how I feel now; I tell her I am energised, vibrant, motivated and only a little sad. I am so happy knowing I am going to feel the same way when I wake up every day: energised and ready to face challenges. I can do this.

A few months ago I booked a trip to Melbourne. I thought if I was going to continue on this no drinking trip, I had to learn how to celebrate in other ways. It was hard to think of how to celebrate without champagne. I decided a trip to Melbourne to see a wonderful friend would be perfect: I could spend the weekend browsing the shops, eating cake on Acland St, maybe seeing a band and exploring St Kilda. Eating and shopping seem like the answer.

I arrive to perfect weather. My friend and I talk a lot; she is studying the same course as I in Melbourne, so she knows what my last few years have been like, knows the learning, the peeling back layers to reveal a shiny new me. We wander St Kilda Esplanade, look at the shops, enjoy a Monarch coffee and cake. We decide to go out to see a band.

The venue is tiny, crowded and loud. I manage to get by drinking pineapple juice and the occasional water. She has a few beers, offering me a drink every time she had one. The thing about not drinking is you realise how much liquid you *don't* need. If I drink every time she does, I will be in the bathroom queue the whole night. We laugh and shout at each other over the noise. I feel the energy of the band giving me some buoyancy but I can't stay awake much past 9pm.

The following morning we drag my bag to the local cafe for breakfast. We perch on wicker chairs as I admire the décor: hanging indoor ferns, a huge red and silver retro espresso machine, books everywhere, and bearded and tattooed wait staff.

A smiling waitress takes our order. We order the same breakfast and coffees. She offers us water and we nod, already mid-conversation. So much to talk about! We are discussing our final presentations and how much more work I have to do when there

is a solid bang on the table followed by two smaller bangs. I look up. An Absolut vodka bottle sits on the table between us beside two 1970s smoke glass tumblers.

I lose my breath. I gasp. That friendly blue logo, the familiar font, the shapely bottle. Vodka was my drink, and here she is on the table in front of me, the same bottle I had bought from bottle shops countless times.

I can picture myself pouring that lovely clear liquid into the glasses and slamming one back. My friend looks up at me and laughs. "Don't worry, they would have washed it out," she smiles until she sees the tears in my eyes, my hitching breath.

"Are you triggered?" she asks, leaning forward. I nod, breathing in slightly panicked breaths. She grabs my arm and guides me to the bathroom. I burst into tears. "They shouldn't do that," I sob. "That's just mean."

"They didn't know, babe." She holds my arms firm, coaxing, "Just breathe." I feel like an idiot. I push the tears away and breathe again, slowly. This is the worst time in the whole time: I feel mad, insane, unhinged and have flashbacks of the past, a whole show-reel of nights in bars with girlfriends, of parties and binges.

Eventually we return to the table and drink the water like nothing happened. "Bloody Melbourne," I laugh. "Fuckin' hipsters".

I give my presentation the following week. It is the last time the students on our course are together as a group. We have been on such a ride together over the two years, and had witnessed so much change in each other. We have celebrated and commiserated so many things: a new marriage, an old marriage break-up, a few breakdowns, deaths of family and friends, teenage children finishing school, new jobs, new boyfriends, new starts in life, new homes, moves and shifts and changes and healing.

As I begin my presentation, I look at everyone's faces and think, "These were the bunch of weirdo hippies that I vowed would never be my friends," looking back at me with such love and support I can hardly contain the tears. These were the people who used language like grateful, honoured, blessed. I thought they were so different to me. I look at them now and realise they are some of my closest friends, people I love, cherish and adore. They have helped me through some major life changes and supported me

when I felt I couldn't stand. They were there for me and cheered me on for all my small successes.

I deliver my talk to them. I had read it at home a hundred times, but they are hearing it for the first time. It is about my journey ditching booze: my shame and remorse, my resolve and determination, the process I went through for healing, who helped me and supported me and my steps towards recovery.

I watch their faces, many damp with tears. Some of these people are adult children of alcoholics and grandchildren of alcoholics; others have family members persevere through violence and alcohol abuse. I know I am making a damn good attempt at breaking the chain of addiction in my family.

When I finish, they clap and cry and I cry, too. It is big. It is the final closing circle on my 90 day process, the process that now has become a lifestyle choice. The thing that has changed my life. I nod in thanks, speechless at how far we have all come, together, how far I have come and how grateful, honoured and blessed I am.



Afterwords

For Georgia, I can't find the right words, or words that are big enough to express my heartfelt respect and appreciation. Hopefully these words come close. She knows; she was there with me the whole time. She was on the phone, in the room, messaging me on Facebook, talking me through it in the car, making me go to yoga, meditation, showing me how to use EFT to tap it out, helping me to visualise, guiding me through neuro-linguistic programming techniques, making me run up and down the car-park yelling things out, and swearing at me when I wouldn't listen or couldn't understand.

She was there with cup after cup of herbal tea, listening, listening, listening, catching me out on my negative thoughts, turning them around and throwing them back at me. Loving me and supporting me, encouraging me and giving me a shove when I wavered. Hugging me and cheering me on and when I thought that I wasn't strong enough, telling me how great I was doing. Thank you, Georgia, you gave me peace.

Giving up alcohol hasn't made me a better person, it has uncovered the person I am. Sometimes it is tearful, sometimes fearful but most times it is cheerful, and it is very, very real.

If you or a family member is struggling with addiction, or would like to learn some helpful tips and strategies for recovery contact me via my website for an in clinic or skype session. www.rachelwilkinson.com.au.

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