



dying FOR A drink

WOMEN ARE **CONSUMING MORE ALCOHOL THAN EVER.**
EVEN WORSE, WE'RE **KEEPING OUR HABITS SECRET,**
OFTEN UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE

WORDS TABITHA LASLEY

'I would drink a six-pack to myself if we had a braai. I used to drink brandy and coke, but I built up a tolerance to that, so I switched to [a Bourbon-type liquor] and lime. If we went out, I'd drink two bottles of wine to myself. I'd black out and the next morning, when I woke up, I wouldn't be able to remember anything. I'd drive myself home from the [night out], but I wouldn't be able to remember doing it.' Megan Coetzee*, an office manager from Cape Town, does not tick the boxes of your typical alcoholic. She never drank alone, or first thing in the morning. She showed no signs of physical dependence. She held down a job and maintained a relationship. Nobody around her was even aware she had a problem; when she told people she was trying to cut back, she was made to feel 'boring'. And yet, she was consuming so much alcohol, she developed gout and arthritis. She is 25.

Megan is not alone. Women are drinking more than ever and recent studies have thrown up some sobering figures. In the UK, research published by the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* found that despite a general downward trend in the number of people dying from alcohol misuse, the number of alcohol-related deaths amongst women in their thirties and forties (otherwise known as Generation X) has soared since the middle of the last decade. 'Around three quarters of these deaths are related to liver disease,' says Dr Deborah Shipton, who coordinated the study. 'And a quarter of deaths

THE NUMBER OF YOUNG WOMEN HOSPITALIZED FOR BEING DANGEROUSLY INTOXICATED BETWEEN 1999 AND 2008 ROSE BY

52%

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CHAPTER OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (AA) ESTIMATES THAT AROUND

50%
OF THEIR NEW MEMBERS ARE WOMEN

are due to mental-health conditions related to alcohol abuse; things like alcohol-induced psychosis or degeneration of the nervous system.' Things are no better in the US

According to Gabrielle Glaser's book, *Her Best-Kept Secret: Why Women Drink – And How They Can Regain Control*, female alcoholism is on the rise in almost every demographic. Records at the US Department of Transportation show that while men still dominate drink-driving arrests, the number of women arrested for drink driving increased 30 per cent between 1998 and 2007 (male arrests were down seven per cent). The number of young women hospitalized for being dangerously intoxicated between 1999 and 2008 rose by 52 per cent (as compared to nine per cent for men). The number of middle-aged women entering alcohol-treatment programmes nearly tripled between 1992 and 2007.

'Alcohol dependency has grown around the globe,' says Glaser. 'In the US, it's up among Latinos, African Americans and Caucasians. South Asian women are drinking really heavily. The pressure on them, as immigrants and first-generation Americans, is immense. A lot of people told me: "You have no idea how heavily Indian women drink. And they do it totally in secret".' South Africa has its own complex relationship with alcohol. Many South Africans are teetotal, but the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified us as having one of the highest levels of binge drinking in the world (along with Mexico, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Ukraine). The South African chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) estimates that around 50 per cent of their new members are women. We also have one of the highest reported rates of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) in the world. According to the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR), three million South Africans are affected by Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS); six million have FASD. 'It's become more acceptable for women to drink,' explains Lian-Marie Drotsky, a spokesperson for the FARR. 'That cuts across all classes, races and ages. As women's economic situation has improved they've got more money to drink. And alcohol is being marketed much more aggressively. Before, liquor was mainly marketed to men. Now, it's definitely being aimed more at women.' It's worked like a charm. Thanks to wily placements, wine and womanhood have become inextricably intertwined. It's easy to forget that until fairly recently, drinking was classed as a male concern, like football or fly-fishing. In the US, the vast majority of wine buyers are now women. Yet the numbers only tell half the story. It is the way in which we drink alcohol, rather than the volume we sink, that is really significant.

'Most women who have problems are drinking alone,' says Dr Mary Ellen Barnes, an addiction specialist who runs a Non 12 Step Rehab Centre tailored to treat female alcoholics. 'Men who drink too much tend to do it with friends, they tend to be quite sociable. Women try to hide it from everybody. Even their best friends don't know, because they're drinking in secret, at home. You may see them at work or at the PTA and you'd never dream they had a problem.' Two decades ago, we used alcohol the same way men did. It was a livener, a social lubricant that helped conversation flow. Now, we use it like a narcotic; something that will seep through us, smoothing out the snags of the day, and easing the knots of tension in our stomachs. 'You don't hear so many men saying, "Oh my God, I've got to have a drink to steady my nerves!"'

says Glaser. 'When alcohol-dependent men are shown slides of their triggers, they are the drink itself; their favourite watering hole or a football game with friends. If women are shown the same slides, nothing happens. It's pictures of traffic jams, messy desks and crying children that ignite their cravings. That's a really telling detail.'

And when we do talk about alcohol? We tend to trivialize our dependence. Glaser cites Facebook groups like 'Moms Who Need Wine' (664 696 likes) and 'OMG I So Need a Glass of Wine or I'm Gonna Sell My Kids' (136 594 likes).

The trope of the fraught suburban mother, hitting the Sauvignon Blanc as soon as the sun's over the yardarm, is everywhere: on television (Courteney Cox in *Cougar Town*, sinking red out of her oversized glass 'Big Joe'); in books (*Sippy Cups Are Not For Chardonnay*); at stores (witness the rise of 'Mommy Juice' wine). Instagram is full of those vaguely retro-looking e-cards printed with mottos like: 'A good man can make you feel sexy, strong and able to take on the world... Oh, sorry that's wine. Wine does that' and 'Once upon a time some kids did as they were told, and their mommy didn't have to lose her shit and drink wine out of the box before noon'. Of course, this is hyperbole. Most women wouldn't be caught dead drinking wine from a box. Part of the reason wine (the bottled sort) is so popular is because it's a premium product.

The number of Generation X women to die from alcohol-related conditions like liver disease has doubled

Clockwise from top
Peaches Geldof;
Pamela Anderson;
Lindsay Lohan;
Lindsay Lohan;
Tila Tequila.



Now, we use [alcohol] like a narcotic; something that will seep through us, smoothing out the snags of the day, and easing the knots of tension in our stomachs



The good stuff is expensive and tastes beautiful. It's served with food and, in moderate measures, is still pushed as part of a balanced diet. It's this socio-economic cachet, its vague associations with a vibrant, sun-soaked Mediterranean lifestyle, which has lulled us into a false sense of security. Replace the word 'wine' with 'vodka' or 'fortified lager' on those Facebook pages, and suddenly they don't look quite so anodyne. 'There is an idea that wine and Champagne are an elitist thing, so people think it's not as dangerous as other kinds of alcohol,' say Drotsky. 'Our CEO always tells the story of talking at a women's Champagne breakfast one morning, and a pregnant woman coming to see her afterwards, saying she loved Champagne and she didn't think it would have the same effect (on her pregnancy).'

This culture of denial remains in place after the birth. Drotsky says that within middle-class families, FASD – which lacks the distinguishing facial characteristics of FAS, all three must be present: smooth philtrum (the surface between the nose and lip), thin upper lip and small eyes – is often misdiagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or autism. FAS is still dismissed as a disease of poverty, something that afflicts rural communities in the Western Cape. Beyond clever marketing and consumer

snobbery, there is another reason women are drinking so much. 'We live in stressful times,' says Glaser. 'Women are more prone to depression, we're more prone to anxiety disorders. And we're far more likely to self-medicate these feelings with alcohol.' Which is exactly what Megan was doing.

Yet she'd also held her life together so efficiently that, as with many female alcoholics, there was no intervention from friends, no ultimatum from her family. She had to take herself to the doctor. She checked into a clinic for two weeks and the psychiatrist there confirmed she suffered from anxiety and depression. 'Basically drinking was my antidepressant,' she says. 'If I drank I felt better. I was shy and drinking gave me confidence. But actually, since I've stopped, I've gained a lot more, just from realizing that I don't need to do that to fit in.'

Megan now abstains from alcohol completely. Her gout is gone. The arthritis though, brought on by excessive drinking, is still with her. Megan's story will ring a bell with many female graduates. Male and female patterns of dependence may differ, but our consumption can be traced back to coeducation. The more education a woman has, the more likely she is to drink. We go to tertiary institutions and match our male friends pint for pint. We go to work in male-dominated industries and continue drinking with the boys, because we've been told socializing with our colleagues is good for our careers. If we take a break to have children, those habits come home with us. But while we've been able to achieve a degree of professional parity with men, we still lag behind them in one vital respect. 'Biologically, we can't process alcohol in the same way,' says Glaser. 'We have more fat, which retains alcohol, and less water, which dilutes it. We make less of an enzyme called dehydrogenase [which breaks down alcohol]. This makes us more vulnerable to its toxic effects.' Which is why, 15 years after graduation, we start dying. Just as women get drunk quicker than men, the long-term effects of alcohol abuse show up sooner. Female drinkers may be driven by a different set of exigencies, but the end point is the same. And while female alcoholism may be a more secretive, solitary disease than the male strain, it's every bit as deadly. **mc**

* Name has been changed