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Toxic Eyeliner and Goop Cocktails

What we must recognize is that substance abuse is part of the patriarchy; that it is not a way out, or even a resting place. It is a lie. It is every bit a lie as sexism, capitalism, classism, racism, and homophobia. . . . There is a major difference though. Sexism, racism, and the rest are done to us; we do the substance abuse to ourselves. And we can stop.

—JEAN SWALLOW

Years ago I sent a text to my friend (and when I say years ago, I mean on my Motorola Razr). I wrote, “I think alcohol is making me fat.” She sent a picture back of Paris Hilton and said, “Then how come Paris isn’t?” (If you’re younger, Paris Hilton was like Kylie Jenner.) I drank a bottle of Pinot in my hotel room that night (because in my logic, work travel meant whole bottles were okay), and the next morning woke up red-faced and bloated; I ran for an hour on the treadmill to fix it. Looking in the mirror on my way to work that morning, I did not look like Paris Hilton, because treadmills don’t undo bottles of wine and self-disgust.

It would take many more years of denial before I went beyond *wondering* if perhaps alcohol was getting in the way of my life. That’s because we’re conditioned not to blame the precious alcohol, or to even worry about whether drinking it might be a bad idea, until we’re certifiable fuckups. What we *are* conditioned to believe is that there are two types of drinkers in this

world, the normal ones (“normies” in AA-speak) who can tolerate alcohol, and the alcoholics who can’t. And this is incredibly convenient for the powers that be (and by the powers that be, I mean the men—and women but mostly men—who control the boardrooms of Anheuser-Busch and Diageo and make assloads of cash off low-carb beer and pinked-out booze) because then we don’t spend time asking ourselves if alcohol might not be working out so well for us or if maybe we shouldn’t be including it in our lives the same way we’ve come to decide we shouldn’t be eating gluten.

We just ask ourselves whether or not we’re alcoholics, and thanks to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence’s twenty-six-point questionnaire—the standard for (self-diagnosing) Alcohol Use Disorder—we don’t really qualify for help unless we’re pissing our beds, racking up DUIs, staying drunk for days on end, or hallucinating. And if we don’t qualify, we don’t really have a problem, and we can just go on free and clear, rocking our ROSÉ ALL DAY shirts (now on sale at Target), slamming shots at work parties, and innocently debating whether we’re heathen if we pair a red with halibut.

In other words, I didn’t ask if alcohol was getting in the way of My Best Life. I didn’t ask whether maybe it was making me sick or wasn’t the best thing to do with my time. I wasn’t an alcoholic, Paris was turned up at Butter (this was a club that *Us* magazine said Paris went to) and still kept her size-zero ass, all was well.

ALCOHOL AND WELLNESS

In the 1950s, before we understood the dangers of smoking tobacco and nicotine, actors would pose as medical doctors in cigarette advertisements to assure the public that smoking was

safe. *It's okay, folks. Doctors do it!* But I grew up in the 1980s. I was taught from a very young age the dangers of smoking tobacco, and my sister and I took turns pressuring my father to quit. I brought home literature from school, and Heather resorted to breaking his cigarettes in half. When we both started smoking cigarettes in our teens, at least we knew what we were doing. Cigarettes killed people, full stop. No amount of smoking was safe, and people like Debbie from the PSA ads (who smoked cigarettes through a hole in her neck that she presumably got from smoking cigarettes) reminded us of what could happen. To this day, I can't think of smoking without thinking of holes in necks, and I don't think I ever had a cigarette without considering its toxicity.

When I look at those advertisements from the 1950s, with their reassuring pictures of old white men in white coats smoking a Camel, knowing all we know now, I always wonder, *How were we ever so stupid? How did we ever buy that lie?*

Like most of us, I grew up believing that drinking was normal. There was nothing wrong with getting drunk or nursing a hangover. We are supposed to be able to handle it and incorporate it into our lifestyles. We are told if we drink moderately, alcohol will do wonderful things for us—red wine has all those antioxidants (and resveratrol!). We are supposed to be able to consume alcohol with ease, as part of a healthy and balanced lifestyle. If we can't do this, there is something wrong with us and not the substance itself.

Drinking is so normalized, and so unquestioned, that we have essentially drawn a line down the middle and put people on one side or the other. There are normal drinkers, and there are alcoholics. For the normal drinkers, alcohol is healthy! And good for you! And in the words of Cheryl Strayed (who overcame heroin addiction), "Wonderful and joyous!" For the alco-

holics, alcohol is bad. Which is not unlike saying heroin is wonderful and joyous when used in moderation, but for Cheryl Strayed it is bad.

I completely bought into this. Until my life came undone, and at thirty-three I looked and felt at least a decade older than I was. Until I started to research and question. Until I realized that *oh my God, it's actually poison. We're all drinking poison.*

In conversation with my mom not long ago, about a relative dying a slow and gruesome death following years of severe alcohol abuse, I mention to her that I'm not shocked that our cousin's throat is coming apart or that her skin is falling off. I tell my mom: "Of course her throat is destroyed, she drank ethanol for decades. You can't drink the same thing we fuel our cars with and expect a much different outcome." In my mind I can clearly envision my cousin drinking from a fuel pump, but my mom is confused and says something like, "It's not the same ethanol, though. Don't we drink something different?" I tell her it's not different. My food label-reading mother—the same one who can list every health benefit of broccoli—is shocked.

From Wikipedia:

Ethanol, also commonly called alcohol, ethyl alcohol, and drinking alcohol, is the principal type of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages, produced by the fermentation of sugars by yeasts. It is a neurotoxic, psychoactive drug, and one of the oldest recreational drugs.

Ethanol is a volatile, flammable, colorless liquid with a slight chemical odor. It is used as an antiseptic, a solvent, in medical wipes and anti-bacterial formulas because it kills organisms by denaturing their proteins. Ethanol is an important industrial ingredient. Ethanol is a good general purpose solvent, and is found in paints, tinctures, markers, and per-

sonal care products such as perfumes and deodorants. The largest single use of ethanol is as an engine fuel and fuel additive.

In other words, we drink—for fun—the same thing we use to make rocket fuel, house paint, antiseptics, solvents, perfumes, and deodorants, and to denature (i.e., take away the natural properties of, or *kill*) living organisms. Which might make sense on some level if we weren't a generation of green-minded, organic, health-conscious, truth-seeking individuals. But we are.

We read labels. We shun gluten, dairy, processed foods, and refined sugars. We buy organic. We use natural sunscreens and beauty products. We worry about fluoride in our water, smog in our air, hydrogenated oils in our food, and we debate whether plastic bottles are safe to drink from. We replace toxic cleaning products with Mrs. Meyer's and homemade vinegar concoctions. We do yoga, we run, we SoulCycle and Fitbit, we go paleo and keto, we juice, we cleanse. We do coffee enemas and steam our yonis and drink clay and charcoal and shoot up vitamins and sit in infrared foil boxes and hire naturopaths and shamans and functional doctors and we take nootropics, and we stress about our telomeres (these are all real words). We are hyper-vigilant about everything we put into our body, everything we do to our body. And we are proud of this. We Instagram how proud we are of this and follow Goop and Well + Good and drop forty bucks on an exercise class because there are healing crystals in the floor. The global wellness economy is estimated to be worth four trillion dollars. *Four trillion dollars.* We are on an endless and expensive quest for wellness and vitality and youth.

And we drink fucking rocket fuel.

Drinking has become so ingrained in the female code, we don't even recognize the nearly endless ways it's pierced our every experience, or even stop to think about the cost of that infiltration. Wine and spirits and even beer are a celebrated, quintessential accessory to having made it as a woman. For moms—one of the most targeted demographics—alcohol isn't just something that pairs well with making dinner, it's what you do all day, every day. There are an almost endless number of greeting cards, magnets, T-shirts, *onesies*, that basically celebrate always being drunk because mothering, we kid, makes us drink. Let me repeat that: Moms are so brainwashed into normalizing what amounts to severe drug abuse, we are literally dressing our babies up in clothes to poke fun at it. There are groups like Sippy Cups Are for Chardonnay, Moms Who Need Wine, an Urban Dictionary definition of Wine Mom (#WineMom), a coloring book titled *Mommy Drinks Because You Cry*, and no one bats an eyelash; we toast and wink because we are all in on the joke. And that's just the tip of the iceberg because wine isn't just the mascot of motherhood, it's the mascot of being a young, single professional, or an old, retired empty nester, or basically being a woman at all. It is so ingrained in what it means to be a woman, we hardly even notice it's standing there next to us in almost every photograph, or showing up at every single thing we attempt to do. We have been programmed to accessorize our lives with wine to the point we can't even see it anymore, or see how the statistics that show skyrocketing rates of alcohol-related liver failure or alcohol addiction include us in them. The horror stories and damages are seen as things that happen to other people.

Recently I heard Gwyneth Paltrow (founder and CEO of

Goop, enthusiastic yoni steamer) on the *Girlboss* podcast talking about the social responsibility Goop holds for its readers. She said she couldn't in good conscience recommend a certain (not-organic, toxic, chemical) eyeliner to her readers because of the potential that it could mess with a woman's delicate endocrine system. Which would be fine and all if the Goop Health Summit weren't sponsored by Ketel One Botanical vodka (owned by the multinational conglomerate Diageo), or if she weren't promoting her preferred, anointed, all-natural, holy eyeliner next to collagen-infused martinis and CBD-spiked cocktails. Because nothing will take you down faster than toxic eyeliner, but drinking ethanol with a shot of collagen is basically snorting the fountain of youth.

What I am saying is: Booze fucks our shit up. More than most things. More than gluten *for sure*, more than dairy *for sure*, more than white sugar and tap water *for sure*, and it fucks our shit up not only because it's an addictive, toxic chemical, but because we live in a world where we haven't quite caught on to that fact just yet. Even Gwyneth doesn't know. And that—the fact that we think it's safe because it's legal and everyone is doing it, including our health icons—is what makes it even more dangerous than, say, cigarettes. Or Maybelline eyeliner.

So what *does* alcohol do to our bodies? Why should we care? And where does this “healthful” narrative even come from?

WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR BODIES WHEN WE DRINK A SINGLE GLASS OF ALCOHOL

In 1991 *60 Minutes* ran a story called “The French Paradox.” It was reported by Morley Safer, a CBS correspondent, and it featured Safer in a French bistro, listing the various unhealthy, fattening culinary habits of the French people, pondering why the

life expectancy, health, and weight of the French were superior to that of Americans if their diet was so full of terrible crap. The conclusion Safer alluded to? Red wine. It might sound entirely innocuous, but it wasn't—that, coupled with a number of studies that were published in the late 1990s and early '00s, and books like *French Women Don't Get Fat*, fueled an idea the American public was all too eager to cling to: drinking wine is healthy.

A number of studies published in the last decade or so have countered this belief. We now know that alcohol is linked to at least seven cancers and a whole host of other diseases and chronic conditions, but we are pretty clueless about the smaller ways it impacts our health. Most of us are more inclined to think drinking moderately is far healthier than not drinking at all. We're also likely to underestimate how much we actually drink, without an awareness of recommended alcohol intake guidelines and serving sizes. As Keith Humphreys noted, "When you tally up all the booze that people report consuming when they are surveyed about their drinking habits, it rarely adds up to even half of the alcohol sold." Consequently, we drink a lot more than we think we do, and we often write off the amount we drink as beneficial. Further, we're more likely to think of any health risk or danger posed by consumption as extreme (addiction, cirrhosis) versus immediate toxicity.

The thing is, *even one glass of wine is disruptive*. The body is constantly seeking homeostasis, or balance, so the moment you ingest any drug, your body begins a counteractive process. Judith Grisel explains this in her book *Never Enough* as an A-B process; the effect of the drug causes an A process, and in trying to adapt to that A process, the body initiates a counteractive B process, which tends to last longer than the A process. As Grisel explains it, "The states of withdrawal and craving from any drug

are *always* exactly opposite to the drug's effects. If a drug makes you feel relaxed, withdrawal and craving are experienced as anxiety and tension." Alcohol is a depressant, so if we're using it to relax, we're actually netting out with more anxiety because of this A-B process—one drink leaves us more stressed, tensed, anxious, and depressed. And this effect isn't reserved for heavy drinkers; withdrawal and craving are things we experience any-time we consume a drug. One glass is one dose.

Alcohol does so much damage to our bodies that to mention all the ways it impacts us physiologically would fill an entire book; consuming alcohol—any amount of alcohol—disrupts nearly every process, system, and organ of the body. Below is a laundry list of just a fraction of the side effects of ethanol consumption, and it reads like one of those sped-up disclaimers that run for minutes in drug commercials, or the paragraphs of fine print that accompany any drug ad in a magazine. If reading this list feels like a dive into some endless pool of health warnings, that's only because it is; the following should come at the end of every Corona commercial or winery tour.

The Short- to Medium-term Effects of Drinking Alcohol

1. Disrupts sleep. Many people think of alcohol as a sleep aid. While it does allow us to fall asleep faster by kicking us into slow-wave sleep, we aren't actually reaping the rejuvenating benefits of deeper sleep because our alpha (thinking) brainwaves are also activated; this means our brain isn't actually getting the benefit of slow-wave sleep, which is responsible for recuperation of the brain and body.

Further, we normally experience seven REM (rapid eye movement) stages during a sleep cycle; when we drink alcohol, we experience about two. Deprivation of REM sleep leads to a number of ailments, in particular an increase in anxiety, depressive states, irritability, and appetite; it also leads to memory loss. Poor sleep in general contributes to stress hormone disruption

(that “tired and wired” feeling—tired during the day and wired at night) and weight gain.

The body takes three to four days to fully remove alcohol from the system, so if we are imbibing once or twice a week, we never fully reap the benefits of sound sleep. Even moderate alcohol use puts us in an almost constant state of sleep deprivation.

2. Fuels anxiety. Because alcohol is primarily a depressant, we reach for it to take the edge off. Which it does, initially. However, the counteractive process (or the B process) to the depressant nature of alcohol is a release of cortisol and adrenaline into the body. If you drink one glass of wine, you might have about twenty minutes of the desired “relaxed” effect before the drug (A process) wears off, and you’re left with increased amounts of cortisol and adrenaline, which fuel anxiety. This means alcohol *causes* anxiety; it doesn’t manage it. It’s one of the worst drugs we can imbibe if we are prone to depressive and anxious states.

3. Impedes detoxification. The liver is the body’s hardest-working organ, performing more than five hundred tasks to keep you healthy. It’s in charge of detoxifying harmful compounds in everything you eat, drink, breathe, apply to your skin, and take as a medication. Since alcohol is one of *the* most toxic substances we ingest, our liver and kidneys prioritize it in the detox process. This means any other toxins waiting to leave our system are deprioritized—the alcohol cuts in line, and we are left with excess toxins.

What the body can’t excrete through its own natural detoxification process, it recirculates through the system and eventually stores it in our body fat, or adipose tissue. This buildup of toxins also affects the central nervous system and mental function, exacerbates anxiety and depression, accelerates aging, and contributes to degenerative disease. All in all, this means a few things. First, losing weight becomes harder. If you’ve ever dieted and plateaued, this is one cause. Second, almost everything you do in the name of detoxification is entirely canceled out by the ingestion of alcohol. Body scrubbing, juice cleanses, or anything else you do to expel toxins—that’s all going to serve the removal of alcohol, or the toxins left in the system after alcohol commandeered the detox process. Alcohol both flushes these nutrients and increases the need for them, eventually leading to a compromised detox function.

To put it bluntly, alcohol ruins healthy liver function, which translates to

looking and feeling like shit. Fatigue, worsening PMS and hormonal issues, acne, bloating, headaches, yellowish skin and eyes, bad breath, BO, constipation or loose stools, and irritability are just some of the ways a disruption in detox shows up.

4. Causes weight gain or interferes with weight loss. Absorption of excess toxins into fat cells isn't the only way alcohol causes weight gain. Alcohol is high in sugar and calories (with zero nutritional value) and a natural appetite stimulant, and it anesthetizes the body processes that tell you when you're full. Because alcohol adversely affects blood sugar and insulin balance, it contributes to sugar and carb cravings. It's also the only beverage on the market that doesn't have a nutritional label or ingredient list. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with gaining weight or being fat, and I don't want to play into the bullshit hype that our size is reflective of our worth or that losing weight is some pinnacle of success. It's not, and diet culture, fatphobia, and the glamorization of thinness are just as choking as alcohol culture. I've included the points on weight gain for those of you who—for whatever reason—are putting efforts into losing weight.

5. Causes facial redness and broken capillaries. If you've ever experienced a flush while drinking or if you've noticed more broken blood vessels on your face, they are directly related to the process of alcohol metabolizing (or the body's reaction to a toxic, foreign substance). Because the body can't store alcohol, it first converts it into acetaldehyde, a severely toxic substance that the body then tries to rid itself of. Acetaldehyde is broken down by an enzyme known as alcohol dehydrogenase; if you drink alcohol faster than you metabolize it (and its byproducts), or if you lack the enzyme (certain populations, like East Asians, are deficient), your body is left with excess acetaldehyde, which can be released only through oxidation (or through the skin). Blood vessels dilate (expand) to release acetaldehyde, thus leaving us with (over time) permanently broken capillaries. These are often clustered near the nose. This is not limited to some people—anyone who drinks alcohol has to excrete it, and all of us do it via respiration. (This also explains that pickled smell you might have the day after a big night that you can't seem to scrub off or sweat out.)

6. Fucks up your brain. Grisel in *Never Enough* calls alcohol a “neurological sledgehammer,” because it affects not just one region of the brain but *all of*

them. Alcohol compromises the entire brain. Memory, motor function, inhibition, personality, emotional volatility—virtually nothing is untouched by alcohol, which assaults our brain on almost every known level. Again, this problem is not isolated to heavy drinking. One drink, moderate drinking, and heavy drinking all negatively impact our most precious organ.

7. Messes with blood sugar balance. Alcohol converts rapidly to sugar in the bloodstream, so it can quickly and temporarily treat shakiness, “hanger,” or anxiety (which is one reason cravings for alcohol or sugar can be so intense once you’ve quit). This larger-than-normal dump of glucose from drinking alcohol leads to a release of insulin (from the pancreas) to restore blood sugar levels. Over time this action leads to an overproduction of insulin and results in low blood sugar levels (hypoglycemia). The pattern weakens the function of the adrenal glands, causing us to reach for more sugar, more alcohol, or other stimulants like coffee, and eventually leads to adrenal and mitochondrial fatigue and other metabolic conditions. There’s also evidence that consuming more sugar is correlated to higher rates of cancer and depression, and since alcohol *is* sugar (and pretty much only sugar), there are myriad ways it contributes to depression: first through the increased sugar intake, second by nature of the drug (it’s a depressant), and third through the hijacking of dopaminergic pathways (as we’ll see in Chapter 5).

8. Disrupts endocrine (hormone) function. Our endocrine system is responsible for regulating our bodily functions, such as our metabolism, sex drive, sleep cycles, energy levels, menstrual cycle, and stress response, to name only a few. Alcohol disrupts the functioning of the endocrine system on a number of levels: (1) it disrupts the sleep cycle (which directly impacts the endocrine system); (2) it raises estrogen levels and depletes testosterone levels; and (3) it artificially stimulates the fight-or-flight response (release of cortisol and adrenaline, for instance), yet another cause of anxiety, depression, and insomnia. In other words, alcohol assaults the system in charge of making sure your body runs properly. The result is fatigue, low sex drive, worsening periods, mood imbalance, poor metabolic function, adrenal fatigue, and disrupted sleep cycles, to name just a few.

9. Is linked to seven different cancers. Alcohol is carcinogenic (it causes cancer). The evidence of the link between drinking and cancer is almost irrefutable. For breast cancer alone, more than one hundred studies have reaf-

firmed the link between drinking and breast cancer. Women who drink three alcoholic beverages a week have a 15 percent higher risk of breast cancer; that risk is increased by 10 percent for each additional drink women have daily (which makes you *really* rethink those bottles of wine with pink ribbons on them). Breast cancer is only one of the cancers linked to alcohol consumption; the others include mouth and throat, esophagus, voicebox, liver, colon, and rectum—basically, any place in the digestive system that alcohol comes into contact with. The cancer risk isn't reserved for heavy drinkers—light to moderate use puts us at greater risk for cancer, period.

10. Causes premature aging. I've already mentioned flushing (facial redness and broken capillaries) and puffiness—side effects that make us look older. But alcohol also leads to loss of collagen and elasticity. And it depletes us of the minerals, nutrients, and antioxidants that counter free radical damage (read: oxidation that ages us) and that help carry oxygen throughout the body. Alcohol also depletes us of zinc and vitamin A, two antioxidants vital for the skin and regeneration of new cells. All told, between these things and every other item previously mentioned, there's no way in hell alcohol is keeping you looking or feeling younger. If anything, the consumption of alcohol undermines every single thing you're doing to preserve your youth.

11. Destroys microbiome. Your gut is home to trillions of bacteria that help you digest and absorb nutrients from your food, regulate your immune system, and even determine how happy you are. You need a rich and diverse array of bacteria to populate a healthy gut. Alcohol causes dysbiosis, a skewed ratio of good and bad bacteria, because it kills good gut bacteria, allowing the bad kind to flourish. This adversely affects probiotic diversity and contributes to yeast overgrowth (candida) and inflammation, which may eventually cause leaky gut, brain fog, unpleasant digestive symptoms, and nutrient deficiencies. It may even increase your risk for autoimmune conditions. To add insult to injury, the gut produces 90 percent of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that promotes a positive, happy mood, and we need certain strains of good bacteria to help us produce serotonin. If these beneficial bacteria are not present due to poor bacterial diversity, your serotonin production suffers (and so does your mood). Finally, most of your immune system resides in your digestive tract. Alcohol lowers immune function in part due to intestinal inflammation and dysbiosis, which affects your ability to fight illness and even diseases like cancer.

This is the short list. There isn't a single body system that isn't affected by alcohol: it's a toxin, and our bodies regard it as such. No matter how much or how little we drink, our bodies suffer the consequences of exposure to alcohol (ethanol) and have to work overtime to counteract its effects.

The interesting thing is that while I was researching this subject, almost every article I found that described some horrific consequence of alcohol consumption included a disclaimer, some "but don't worry you can still drink!" type statement meant to reassure the reader that alcohol isn't *that* bad. The thing is, it *is* that bad, and what's worse is that even in the places where the evidence stacks up right in front of us, there's some guy in the corner trying to reassure us it's still safe to drink.