



FLOWERS FALL

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

Thirsty: Wading Through the Intoxicating Waters of Being Bad

YET, THOUGH IT IS LIKE THIS, SIMPLY, FLOWERS FALL AMID OUR LONGING,
AND WEEDS SPRING UP AMID OUR ANTIPATHY.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

The writer Stefanie Wilder-Taylor has made a career of being a ribald and boozy mom. Her popular books have names like *Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay* and *Naptime Is the New Happy Hour* (2006 and 2008; both Simon Spotlight Entertainment). A couple of weeks ago, she confessed on her blog that her happy hours aren't so cheerful. Oops.

"For some people I'm sure this is a nice thing, a tribunal thing (a drink at the end of the day with their spouse or friends)," she writes. "For others it might be a once-in-a-while treat to go out and have a couple of cocktails. For me, it's become a nightly compulsion and I'm outing myself to you; all of you: I have a problem."

Whatever we might think of the public nature of her revelation (I should talk!), mom-blogs in general, or the goofy titles of Ms. Wilder-Taylor's books, I for one think she is pointing to something interesting. While I certainly don't drink nightly, very compulsively, or much at all while Azalea is up and about—despite my bravado, I am actually a pretty tame social drinker—I have noticed an increase in my attraction to alcohol over the past few years. Since Azalea was born, I crave the softening of a certain edge more than ever before. At the end of a week or even sometimes a day, all the awareness I have so diligently been honing burns a hole in my pocket and I lust to spend it all in one place. Then, when Azalea goes to bed, I want a drink, and, yes, even a smoke. Gross, I know. But I come by it so honestly!

As I wrote last month's column on "slow parenting," I reflected on my family's style, and I came to see even more clearly why it is that being a parent arouses a desire in me to be bad: I have oddly fond memories of being a child among "partying" adults. I remember aunts and uncles sitting in lawn chairs wearing Bermuda shorts, drinking gin and tonics on Memorial Day, Independence Day, Satur-Day, . . . as we ran around in our crazy plaids, racing each other with eggs on spoons, getting lost on our tricycles (okay, that was just me), and eventually smoking butts in the woods that lined the edges of public parks. Luckily my parents were not the big drinkers. In fact my dad had an actual allergy and vomited profusely from the stuff; I never saw him drink a drop, and my mom enjoys a little buzz but is a total lightweight who doesn't like being out of control. However, surrounding my mom was her family, brimming with booze, and *everyone* smoked like chimneys all day, every day. Have you seen "Mad Men"? It was like that.

And then night came. I can remember lying in my "snuggler" (this is what my cousins called sleeping bags) on the top floor of their Grosse Pointe cape, listening to the raging "fun" down below. Cackling laughter (my mom), saucy haranguing (Aunt Jo), shark-like attacks (Aunt Brenda), angry affection (Aunt

Becky), and the slow build of the matriarch's indisputable opinions regarding whatever matter was currently under "discussion" (that would be Grandma Wilda, the tiny, old, Scotch-drinking arthritic who never slurred a single word and could stay standing—figuratively, at least—even after six-foot-nine Uncle Richie, Aunt Brenda's husband, had keeled over). Then, in the morning, some unlucky, coughing-but-still-smoking, bleary-eyed grown-up—intriguingly distant—would quietly make waffles for the gang of us. Then we would all ramble over to the TV to continue our own dramas in the light of day, and the adult could return to bed. God help us.

I liked my aunts and uncles and many cousins, yet there was something scary about the drinking. But I guess since I could get away from it at the end of the weekend, it was delightful, too. And scary and delightful equals totally compelling.

So here I am. Even in the midst of my sincere desire to wake up, not to mention my vow to practice the Buddhist precepts, one of which is "proceed clearly; do not cloud the mind," I do occasionally long to numb out, and those occasions can happen frequently! And as much as I might lust for a tasty margarita or an ice-cold beer, when I get down to it, I don't think it's the booze, exactly, that calls me. As a friend of mine, also a Buddhist mom, recently said as we met at a beach party the morning after my big 40th birthday party, being a mom makes illicit behavior incredibly appealing. A cigarette or a shot can so clearly delineate our naughty-girl adult selves from our good-girl mommy identities. It feels good to be someone, after all, and what better way to emerge out of the fog of taking care of other people than to recklessly neglect ourselves? And in the company of other women, raising a glass to the freedom to be a little lushy? Irresistible!

But freedom, of course, is not exactly the right word. Sure, as a grown-up I can exercise my inalienable right to drink, to smoke, to do whatever I darn well please, thank you very much. But does that make me free? Am I free when thoughts about my charmingly rebellious forays interrupt my workday? Will I be free when I am diagnosed with some terrible—and totally not cute or empowering—disease? People find liberation in any condition, but I sure hope it doesn't come to that. In any case, Buddhism teaches that attachment to things—the drink, the idea, the identity—is more the problem than whatever thing we may be attached to. It's my longing, my thirst, if you will, to be somewhere else, to embody a different reality—a fantasy life—that Buddhism aims to bring to light as the root of my suffering, not a rule about how many drinks is okay or not okay. In other words, there is nothing inherently wrong with being bad.

But there's nothing particularly good about it, either. ●