

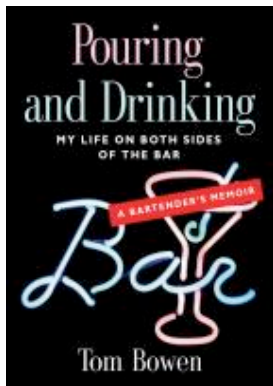
Pouring and Drinking

MY LIFE ON BOTH SIDES
OF THE BAR

A BARTENDER'S MEMOIR



Tom Bowen



POURING AND DRINKING is the memoir of a man who fell in love with the drinking life, a life that eventually took its toll. A personal story of love and redemption told from the unique perspective of someone who has literally spent his life on both sides of the bar, it grabs you at the very first drink, and holds you right up until last call. *POURING AND DRINKING* is a book you will never forget.

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My Life on Both Sides of the Bar

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**Pouring and Drinking:
My Life on Both Sides of the Bar**

A Bartender's Memoir

Tom Bowen

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“There’s nothing romantic, nothing grand, nothing heroic, nothing brave, nothing like that about drinking. It’s a real coward’s death.”

—Warren Zevon

To borrow a phrase from Dylan Thomas: “It was in the rich and heavy afternoon,” that I loved the bar at Locke-Ober the most. Especially in the late fall or early winter when the sunlight began to recede a little quicker. I liked it when there was a steady rain outside or a soft snow falling, and it was so warm and snug in that mahogany smoke-filled room.

The lunch crowd had drifted off. The diet coke and iced tea drinkers had all scurried back to their office cubicles. The regulars were left standing together, their protruding midsections pressed hard against the shiny, wet, glass-strewn bar. There was no more work to be done that afternoon, or any afternoon for that matter, when this group convened after lunch.

On any given day there would be a combination of Bill, Doug, “The Coach.” Carl, Archie, Jan, Dennis, Henri, Charlie, and John. These were my good old boys. I loved them, and I think that they loved me in return. Our bond was that we all loved the high life.

It was mid-to-late afternoon, and class was about to begin. I would dim the lights and turn up the jazz on the stereo. We would listen to the sad songs of Billie Holiday or Chet Baker, and the cool riffs of Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. The tales would get a tad taller now, the lies a little larger, and the stories a bit more exaggerated. Reality was not expected, nor

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particularly welcome at this time. Teetotalers need not apply.

This was the hour for Irish coffees, inexpensive ports, and oceans of the house red wine. Will used to say after drinking vodka and then pinot grigio during lunch,

“I think I’m ready for a cleansing Bass Ale.”

And the cleansing would begin. If someone were to mention going back to the office, Sid could usually be counted on to quote the great line from Oscar Wilde,

“Work is the curse of the drinking class.”

Although we had all heard this a hundred times, we would all laugh like we were hearing it for the very first time. Then someone would order another round.

Soon evening plans would be rearranged, train schedules would be rechecked, and wives, girlfriends, and secretaries would be called.

I often wondered what these regular daytime drinkers did at night. Did they continue to drink? Did they call it a day? Where did they go from here? What were their real lives like?

I suppose that it didn’t much matter. What mattered was our time together in that master class, in that hallowed place, at that special time of day, during

that brief and fleeting period in all our lives, that we will never, ever have back again.

Knowing how to play the game, the boys would always pay their checks before the night bartenders came on. They would take care of me, and always make my day. The controller would come down from the office with a new cash drawer for the evening shift. He would ring me out, and then it was time to go home.

Class dismissed.

Pouring and drinking. Good guy, bad guy. Flawed hero, my favorite kind. This is my story. Let me continue.

Betsy and I were now living in a loft in the Leather District. I was invited to a Boston College football game by my friend, Bill, who had fifty yard line seats. I left the house at about 10 AM that morning and met Bill at a local bar/restaurant near the football stadium. Time for a couple of quick glasses of wine. Then we joined Bill's friends in the parking lot adjacent to the football field for some heavy tailgating.

The game. I think BC won. More tailgating, and back on the subway to downtown Boston. We closed

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the Ritz Bar that night, and I think I arrived home at 2 AM. Betsy commented,

“Quite a day of football . . . from 10 AM on Saturday till 2 AM Sunday morning.”

Another time, Betsy went to bed early one night. She had a bad cold. I sat up listening to music and sipping red wine. I was bored and had a crazy idea. Since Betsy was dead to the world, maybe I could just slip out, and no one would be any wiser. So out into the enigmatic night I went. I walked through the teeming neon streets of Chinatown and into the more foreboding shadows of the Combat Zone. I entered the Glass Slipper, a local strip club and found a seat at the bar. I drank a couple of Buds, smoked a couple of cigarettes, and then headed back home. No harm done.

I quietly opened the apartment door and ran smack into Betsy. I was caught red-handed. “Where were you?” she said. What could I say? I told her the truth.

“The Glass Slipper, isn’t that a topless bar?” she demanded.

“I guess I was just being stupid,” I mumbled, as I headed into the bedroom.

Later it became kind of a joke between us (the night Tom slipped out to the Slipper), but on that evening no one was laughing.

Another alcoholic anecdote . . . another friend, another game, another long night.

I met Carl at the Ritz Bar for a quick drink. A perfect night for baseball at Fenway Park. We had drinks and dinner at Eastern Standard in Kenmore Square, and then settled into Carl's box seats behind the Red Sox dugout. The obligatory beers throughout the game, and then onto a few bars afterwards. Carl finally had the good sense to call it a night. I had one more stop to make, the hospital emergency room!

Someone had found me lying in the street a few blocks from my home. I had fallen or passed out, and was bleeding from a gash in the back of my head.

The hospital called Betsy and advised her of my condition. They sewed me up and released me when I sobered up in the early morning. Oh, when would I ever learn?

As I ventured out into the dawn's early light, I had a strong urge for a cigarette. I saw a nurse leaning against the side of the building. She was a smoking nurse. I bummed a cigarette from her, and walked home to face the music.

Betsy and I had made plans to meet Betsy's friend Rebecca and her husband at the Ritz for drinks. Rebecca's new husband was a judge. Not the "sober

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as a judge” kind of judge. More, the alcoholic kind. More like me. We got along just fine.

We all sat at the bar that night. The women sitting side by side, deep in conversation. The judge and I pounding down the chardonnays.

By the time Betsy realized what was happening, it was too late. She quickly ordered us some food, but again it was too late. I was drunk. We made a hasty early exit.

The next day I was full of apologies, but they all sounded so hollow, even to me.

Unfortunately two or three days later, it happened again. After drinking wine with Betsy before and during dinner, Betsy retired for the evening. I stupidly opened another bottle of wine, and drank the whole damn thing.

When Betsy awoke in the middle of the night, I was not in bed next to her. Where was he? There I was passed out on the living room floor. Enough. Betsy was fed up. The next day was her day off, and she went to visit her mother. She decided to spend the night at her mother’s house. This scared me. Scared me straight. I sat down and wrote Betsy a heartfelt letter wherein I pledged to give up drinking for good. I was serious this time. There was no way that I was going to lose Betsy.

I gave the letter to Betsy when she came home the next night. She looked a bit skeptical. Like she had heard this before.

“These are not just words, Betsy. I’ll prove it to you with my actions.”

She gave me a “we’ll see” kind of look.

*

Sober. Not a drop. I could do it. I told everyone who would listen. I told my alcoholic friends, who had quit. And I told my alcoholic friends, who still drank. Sometimes it seemed like these were the only people I knew—the recovered alxies, and the drinking alxies.

I had many opportunities to cheat, but I didn’t. I was bound and determined this time. I had my non alcoholic beer and cigarette during our cocktail hour at home. Then decaf green tea after dinner. No exceptions. Even when Betsy was away on a buying trip, I would stick to my no alcohol routine.

One night when Betsy was in New York City I went to an early movie and then stopped for dinner at Via Matta, a favorite restaurant in Park Square. I sat outside, had my non alcoholic beer and cigarette, and then a fine plate of penne pasta. After dinner I ordered

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dessert with my espresso and smoked another cigarette. I was feeling quite proud of myself. Before I paid the bill I went inside to use the men's room. As I walked by the bar I noticed an old alcoholic former customer from the Ritz days. The last I remembered he had given up the sauce. But there he was swilling down the wine and acting like a fool. I felt sad and a little sorry for him, and maybe just a touch superior. But suddenly I recalled that it wasn't too long ago that he was the sober one, and I was the drunken idiot. It was a humbling realization. I walked home, slept well, and woke up again with no hangover.

My mother died in November 2007, just two months shy of her 89th birthday. She had been living in an assisted living situation for about four or five years. She was surrounded by family, and had accepted death as the natural order of things.

I saw her a couple of days before she died. You could tell that the end was near, but she was still very much aware. She looked at me and smiled softly. I held her hand. She said,

“Tom I like your jacket.”

It turned out that those were her last words to me, but that was so typical. She was always checking out

her kids, making sure that we looked presentable to the world.

As I drove back to Boston that day, I thought about how, over the years, my mother's strength and wisdom had always helped to guide me along life's journey. I remembered one time years before when I had a late night conversation with her about the ups and downs of life, about getting older and the so-called mid-life crisis. I had had a few drinks that night, and I think that I was feeling a little sorry for myself at the time. She gently reminded me that when she was my age (51 at the time), she was a widow with seven children.

“Life goes on Tom,” she said.

And it has. Thanks, Mom.

My children are all grown-up, all college graduates, all gainfully employed, all happily married, all healthy and smart, and all leading interesting and productive lives. I am a very proud pop.

Adam, after Berkeley, traveled through South America for several months, and then settled back in Massachusetts.

He put on a jacket and tie and went down to Washington, DC to interview for a couple of government jobs. These interviews were arranged by

my brother Fred, who was a lawyer in our nation's capital.

When Adam came back from DC he said that becoming "a suit" was not for him. He put it this way,

"When I come from work at night, I want to have grass stains on my pants."

Adam became a teacher and has taught third grade in the Bell School in Marblehead for over 15 years. He and his lovely wife Libby live in a small house in Marblehead with their 10 year old daughter Riley and their 5 year old son Finn.

T.J. took a different route. After college he went to Los Angeles. Did some standup comedy. Then worked for a Hollywood writer and director of a Showtime television series called *Going to California*. He traveled all over the country on location for that show. He was even written into the script and appeared in two episodes. It was a real kick to see T.J. on TV.

My "beautiful boy" ran with a fast crowd in Hollywood for a while before embracing the straight and narrow and settling down with the love of his life, Ellen. Before I had met her I asked T.J. what was Ellen like. "She's beautiful, smart and nice," was his answer. They are now married, living in West L.A. and have just had their first child, a boy called Luca.

T.J. has written a couple of movie scripts that are currently being shopped around Tinseltown. He cannot, however, quit his day job, where he works for Beverly Hills Catering.

After her graduation Casey followed T.J. out to Los Angeles. Before she left she had dinner with us in Boston one night. Betsy went home early and Casey and I lingered over coffee at the restaurant. We then walked back to our apartment and sat out on the front steps for a few minutes.

I remember that we talked about love that starry night on the stoop. Casey tearfully admitted that she had never truly been in love. I confessed that at her age I hadn't been properly in love either. We both had a good cry and then a cigarette before heading inside. Casey spent the night on our couch.

A few days later she split for the Coast. Soon after she landed a sales job for a bottled water company, and eventually a marketing position with a company called Larabar which makes and sells fruit and nut health bars. Casey grew with the company which was later purchased by General Mills. She now holds a national marketing job with the firm. This involves some traveling, but she can live anywhere and chose to move back East.

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What about love? She got together with an old friend of Adam's from Marblehead, Greg Bates.

When Adam and Greg were in their late teens they worked together at Shube's Market in Marblehead. Greg was over at our house all the time. Casey who was around 9 or 10 years old at the time always had a crush on Greg, a good looking, fun guy with a lot of personality. Greg was always so nice to Adam's kid sister, and that really impressed me.

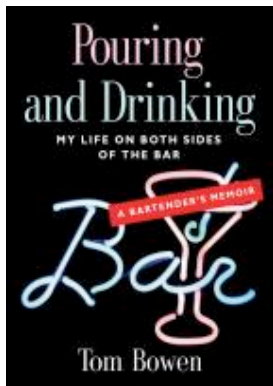
He soon moved to California, got married, had two children, and then came back to Marblehead. Greg and his wife eventually were divorced. The next thing I knew Casey and Greg were dating.

The crush of a ten year old girl, twenty years later, turned into true romance, and they are now married and living in downtown Marblehead.

I have stayed in touch off and on with my "little brother" Kiki. He is now 20 years old and living on his own. He calls me every once in awhile. Last time I talked to him he was working in a nursing home. I also ran into him with a couple of his friends in downtown Boston recently. He seemed very happy to see me, and he introduced me as his "big brother." It felt good to see him so at ease, laughing and joking with his friends. He had come such a long way from that day when we first met.

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After we parted, and as I was walking home, I thought about all that Kiki had overcome, but also all the challenges that still lay ahead for him. He's such a good kid. I hope that he makes it.



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