

Amends

RENAY COSTA

Quinn searched the chalkboard menu of the café deliberating what the appropriate beverage would be. What does a soon-to-be-divorcée drink while composing a letter to the man she separated from about a month ago? Wine would be the obvious option, but she was now a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the letter was part of the ninth step, which required her to “make direct amends” to those she had harmed, and tonight she was attempting her amends to Gil, her soon-to-be ex-husband. A pumpkin spice latte, her regular order, seemed too saccharine and sentimental. Quinn decided that a macchiato, slightly bitter and sophisticated, was suitable for a woman waiting for her divorce to be finalized. With her drink in hand, Quinn found a corner booth and took out the notebook that had served as her journal since she started AA about three months ago, and put pen to paper.

Dear Gil:

I am sorry that you were so insecure and threatened by my success when you were unemployed. I am sorry that I shut you out when I came home from a long day of work and saw that you had done literally nothing all day. I am sorry that I started to enjoy drinking because catering to your fragile male ego frayed my nerves.

Sincerely, Quinn

Quinn reviewed her writing and imagined her AA sponsor Marla's raised eyebrows and wry smile if she shared this with her. Marla was great, but the woman did not possess a sense of humor. If she asked Quinn about her progress on making amends to Gil, Quinn would just say that she was "not in the right place" to do that now.

Having attempted her amends to Gil with what she believed was a good faith effort, Quinn deliberated what to do next. She wasn't quite ready to go home. She found her small loft apartment, which she'd moved into about a month earlier after filing for divorce, too quiet and cramped, and being there too long inevitably led to comparisons of the spacious condo she used to share with Gil. During their engagement, about four years ago, Gil suggested that she move into his apartment in Brookline, so they could avoid the obligations of home ownership. Quinn, who wanted to be near the water, proposed buying a house on the North Shore so they could start building equity. They ultimately compromised with a two-story condo in the suburbs. It was the first of many compromises. The word "compromise" came up so often during the engagement it had become an inside joke. *Darling, let's compromise and use red and silver as our wedding colors. Sweetie, let's compromise and have Italian for dinner. Honey, let's compromise and start trying for a baby in six months.* At some point it had stopped being funny.

Quinn could hear Marla's soft voice as she turned the key in the ignition. *"You never have to be alone. You can call me anytime. And there is always a meeting you can go to."* Quinn sighed and took the AA pamphlet out of her glove box and saw that there was a meeting that began in twenty minutes at her regular spot.

Quinn began attending AA meetings about three months earlier as a requirement of her plea agreement for her first-offense OUI. At her first meeting, it had actually been three days since her arraignment and plea hearing, and four days since the Night of the Lemon Drop Martinis with Ben, but she accepted a 24-hour chip because the next one available was a one-week chip, and she wanted to start the program honestly.

Quinn attended meetings at a church downtown once or twice a week. Members gathered in a room with white-washed walls, occupied with a rack storing black choir robes and decorated with pictures of Mary, Jesus, and the disciples observing from above. Quinn was reminded of a bar at closing time with the lights coming on, with everyone's flaws suddenly shown in sharp relief. She didn't want to imagine that she belonged in this group of beer bellies, greasy hair, and ruddy complexions, and was unable to relate to the stories the other members shared. She never drank mouthwash for the alcohol, stored nips in her desk at work, or caused a scene at a wedding. However, anxious to complete each step of the program as quickly as possible, she readily admitted when she started the program, as required by the first step, "that she was powerless over alcohol and that her life had become unmanageable."

Looking for Marla and not seeing her, Quinn took a seat in the back. She suppressed an eye roll as she saw Charlie's large frame lumber towards the front of the room. Charlie was a regular speaker, and she could recite the facts of his personal history as if they were her own. Formerly an accountant at a large firm. Married ten years with two children. Hit rock bottom when he was fired for hitting on a colleague

when he was drunk. Praying for a reconciliation with his wife, but accepting that it may not happen. *This is your penance*, she thought, bracing herself for the litany of the slights and grievances Charlie had suffered the past week. *This is where you deserve to be*.

Quinn and Gil met when they were students at Boston College Law School. A year ahead of her, he was infamous on campus for wearing a suit and tie to every class. Though they were members of the same Commercial Law study group, they never really spoke to each other until a student happy hour one evening, when Quinn gained the courage from several martinis to ask him why he wore a suit every day. “The clothes make the man,” he replied with a wink. Quinn giggled at his reply, and Gil found himself laughing along with her. Quinn admired his complete disregard for what others thought of him, unbothered by whispers that he sucked up to professors and spoke too much in class. Their relationship evolved from being the last two to leave the study group, to him sitting next to her in class, to him walking her home to her apartment. By the time he grabbed her hand one evening, it was both expected and exhilarating.

Quinn was proud when he made law review and when he obtained a position with Davis and Yates, one of the most prestigious firms in Boston. When she graduated a year later, she got an offer from Volk and Lodge, a small boutique business litigation firm. Their wedding soon followed. Listening to her girlfriends criticize their significant others, she would merely nod her head, with little to complain about with Gil. She tried to suppress the smile on her face when they attended functions together, sandwiched between singles who were tired of the chase and couples with children barely speaking to each other.

In their second year of marriage, Davis and Yates went through a “restructuring” that involved closing the Boston office and laying off junior associates like Gil. The legal job market was evolving quickly, with non-litigation duties being done by legal software or assigned to paralegals. Finding a comparable position was proving to be a challenge for Gil. His motivation and optimism, which were so high when he first received the news, declined steeply with each passing month.

Quinn spent a great deal of time showering Gil with affirmations and acceptance. “*Stop worrying—you are more than your job and we have enough to get by for a bit.*” “*It’s okay if you didn’t send out any resumes today—you must be burnt out.*” “*Of course, go to the Patriots game with Ted—you deserve to have some fun.*” Gil would always offer not to go, but she never objected. Sometimes it was easier to be by herself than to constantly reaffirm him.

One night, during that eggshell period before her OUI, Quinn entered the house struggling with a heavy bag of groceries. The shutting of the door woke Gil up from a nap on the couch.

“Hello,” he said drowsily, dressed in his new uniform of a t-shirt and jeans. Quinn winced, recalling how tall and svelte he used to look in his suits.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Fine.”

Quinn waited a beat. “My day was pretty good. The court granted the motion for summary judgment in that employment case today. And James was so impressed he said that he was going to assign me to a contempt complaint for Ben Jacques, that restaurant owner from Texas. Have you heard of him?”

Not waiting for a response, Quinn entered the kitchen, and saw the sink filled with dishes. The same dishes that she had used to serve the pot roast that she cooked the night before. With an aggressive clattering of her heels, she strode towards the overflowing trash can, topped with a Styrofoam container, and smelled the Chinese food that Gil must have ordered for lunch. "Cooking, dishes, trash. Cooking, dishes, trash. That's all I fucking do. Cooking, dishes, trash," she muttered.

"What's that?" Gil called.

"Nothing," she chirped.

"So I got a rejection letter from that firm I interviewed with last week," Gil said, entering the kitchen. "They probably hired some recent graduate they can underpay."

"I'm sorry, honey. Just keep applying. You know it's a numbers game."

"So I've been thinking," he said, leaning against the fridge as Quinn put groceries in the cabinet. "Maybe this is the perfect time to start a family. We would save a fortune in daycare if I stay home and watch the baby."

"Maybe," Quinn replied, her voice breaking as she swallowed the bile that rose to her mouth. She grabbed a bottle of cabernet sauvignon from the counter and filled a wine glass about three-quarters. The household chores had not really bothered her before, but now Gil didn't have an excuse to not help. She never mentioned it, knowing that any comment on assisting with the chores would be seen as indirect criticism of his unemployment. And now he was ready to give up for some grand ambitions of staying home to raise children. She

inhaled the oak scent of the wine as it flooded her mouth, cleansing her palate of the stomach acid that she had swallowed. She welcomed the warmth spreading through her body and exhaled. *That's better*, she thought, swirling the glass in her hands, caring a bit less and forgetting a bit more with each sip.

Ben Jacques, a Texas transplant to Boston who spoke with an exaggerated drawl, wore cowboy boots and a bolo tie, and enjoyed the attention they attracted. Quinn wasn't sure if the Texas good-ol'-boy presentation was genuine or an act, but he amused her all the same. She had represented him that morning in a contempt trial for unpaid child support filed by Ben's ex-wife, and they were celebrating having the complaint dismissed. Ben suggested the Four Seasons, and Quinn readily agreed, thinking that she and Gil had not gone to a nice restaurant since his layoff several months earlier. James, her supervising partner, had already sent a text congratulating her and told her to take the rest of the day off. Flanked with James' approval and Ben's praise, Quinn couldn't stop smiling. The other associate attorneys at the firm often compared a good day in court to sex, and Quinn was beginning to believe there was something to that.

"I tell you what, I get a great deal of satisfaction seeing how fat she's gotten since this whole thing started. Did you see her bursting out of that button down shirt? It was like watching the filling of a sausage ooze out of its skin!" Ben puffed his chest out, attempting an imitation of his ex-wife, and its surprising likeness almost made Quinn spit out her lemon drop martini.

"And the look on her face when you pulled out those Facebook posts with her and George!" Ben continued. "Bitch didn't think we had it in us."

"I thought you'd enjoy that. I didn't want to but she forced our hand."

They had been there an hour and she was on her second drink, trying to keep up with Ben, who was drinking whiskey. Her mind, which had moments before been racing, slowed down and she found herself laughing easily at Ben's stories about employees sleeping together and managers trying to cheat him. Compact with a shaved head, Ben was not a man she would have described as her type when she was single, but she could see that there was something attractive about him. Her face flushed with guilt at the thought, and she began looking around at the other tables.

Seated to their left was a couple about her and Gil's age. She observed the ease of the couple's conversation, with soft laughter and occasional touching. The woman's hand gestures emphasized her large engagement ring. They were too familiar with each other to be mere colleagues or friends. An aura of impenetrability surrounded them, triggering something like a memory. That was not a woman who had spent a half hour last night researching moisturizers on Amazon because she had scraped the bottom of her jar of La Mer cream. Nor did that woman ever have to cancel her appointment for highlights on Newbury Street because her husband had a newfound desire to be a stay-at-home dad to children they hadn't even agreed to have yet.

"Do you know them?" asked Ben, breaking her thoughts.

"No, no, I thought so but I was wrong."

"I suppose she's attractive enough, but I'm partial to brunettes myself," Ben said with a wide grin, inching closer to her in the booth. "So tell me, Counselor. Does watching all of us poor bastards going through divorces ever make you think about your own marriage?"

How easy it would be, she thought, loosened by two or three martinis, to tell Ben things she couldn't tell her own husband. That she no was no longer attracted to Gil, and that she resented him for not being able to enjoy her success. Ben was neither a stranger nor a friend, and with his case concluded, she wasn't sure she would ever see him again. Blood rushed between Quinn's legs, reminding her that she and Gil hadn't had sex in ages. Ben's failure to break eye contact suddenly felt threatening and her sympathetic nervous system begin firing.

Quinn looked at the time on her cell phone. "I should head home. I have dinner plans with my husband." It wasn't true, but Ben wouldn't know that. He quickly leaned back, and she knew her message had been received. If she left now, they both had plausible deniability, with no offense being given or taken. She gulped the remainder of her third martini, and her throat burned.

"You tell your husband he's married to one hell of an attorney. Now don't you go being a stranger."

"Of course not. Good night, Ben." She offered him a handshake and exited the restaurant, smiling at the waiters and the valet who retrieved her car. As she drove her Audi out of the garage, her phone beeped with a text from Gil: *Going to meet Ted to shoot some pool. See you later.*

Quinn continued to drive as she texted back: *Ok. Have fun. XOXO.*

Quinn decided that she wasn't ready to go home. She picked up her phone and texted her sister Kim: *Guess what amazing sister just had a big win in court?* Kim responded quickly: *Congrats! Come over and*

tell me all about it! I'll have sangria ready by the time you get here! Quinn responded with a wine glass emoji and a smiley face and put her phone down. She saw that she had taken a wrong turn and was driving down an unfamiliar street. From the corner of her eye she saw blue and red lights flashing from behind her and she instinctively slammed her right foot down on the brakes to slow down. *Not me, not me, not me...please, please, PLEASE let it not be me...*

She glanced in her rearview window, and confirmed that she was the only one on the road. *Act sober, act sober, act sober*, she repeated to herself. She pulled over, put the car into park, and gripped her hands on the steering wheel as if it were a life preserver.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm stopping you because you've been swerving on the road and you turned at a red light when the sign said no turn on red. Have you had anything to drink tonight?"

Everything that happened after being stopped was a blur. Refusing the breathalyzer, advice that she had always given to her clients but never thought that she would need. Calling her sister. Driving to the station in the back of the police cruiser. Kim and Doug retrieved her car, delivering it to her house, and met her at the station. The booking lasted half an hour, and the lights of the station were garish and sobering. Her license was automatically revoked for six months for refusing the breathalyzer, and she had to appear in court the following day. As Kim and Doug drove her home, Quinn was grateful that her sister didn't lecture her. If Kim wondered why Quinn had called her instead Gil, she didn't ask.

Quinn was surprised and relieved that she made it home before Gil. She buried herself under her comforter, regularly pinching herself

to see if she was dreaming. Around 10:00 p.m. Gil returned and watched television for an hour before coming upstairs. She waited until he was in the bathroom brushing his teeth.

Quinn closed her eyes, and clenched her toes and fingers. "I have to tell you something," she said, after she heard Gil spit out his toothpaste. "I got an OUI tonight."

"Are you kidding me? Jesus, Quinn! What the hell happened?"

"It was only two drinks. I guess I didn't realize how strong they were and some asshole cop stopped me."

"I was beginning to think it was a problem but I didn't see this happening."

The limbic part of Quinn's brain took over, shattering the thin veneer of patience and understanding that had contained her resentment. "Of course you didn't see this happening! You don't see anything! You're never here!"

"Don't lash out at me just because you did something stupid! Why didn't you call me?"

"Because you were busy! Like you always are! Doing what, God only knows!"

He sighed heavily, seating on the bed. "What happens next?"

"I have to appear in court tomorrow. I'll probably plea out. You'll need to drive me. My license has been suspended."

"So now I have to be your chauffeur?"

"It's not like you have a job, anyway!"

"Go fuck yourself, Quinn," Gil said, leaping up to stand.

"I might as well! You haven't in two months!"

Gil grabbed the nearest shirt and stormed out of the room before he even had time to put it on. Quinn heard the door slam downstairs

and saw his car drive away. He returned two hours later, slipping under the covers without saying a word. He spooned her, something he hadn't done in months, and Quinn fell asleep thinking that maybe the distance between them wasn't insurmountable after all.

The next morning, they woke up and apologized to each other, but Quinn still felt unsteady in his presence, realizing they have achieved more a *détente* than a breakthrough in their marriage. Quinn could barely look him in the eyes, afraid of what she would see. She had violated a trust, reflecting her worst thoughts about him back at him. As she cooked and cleaned without complaint, she wasn't sure that she would ever be able to make it up to him.

After several weeks of Gil driving her to AA meetings, Quinn noticed a gleam in Gil's eyes that unsettled her. *See, I'm not the only fuck-up in this marriage now*, his tight smile seemed to say. She realized maybe their marriage was a fragile fiction in which they had both lost faith. She repeated the newly learned Serenity Prayer to herself, asking God to grant her *"the serenity to accept the things I can't change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."* As she collected chips commemorating a week, one month, and then two months in AA, Quinn attempted to summon the wisdom to know which category her marriage fell under.

When Quinn received a memo that she had received a raise about two months after her OUI, she thought maybe there was something to all this talk of a Higher Power in AA. Maybe Marla was right, and the program worked if you worked it. She had not had a drink in two months, and she was being rewarded with a higher salary. Suddenly, her living circumstances and her marriage were things that she could

change, if she had the courage. Quinn immediately calculated her monthly take-home pay and began perusing real estate listings in Marblehead, researching what thirty percent of her new take home pay would get her. She focused on apartments near the train station, and estimated how long her commute from Marblehead to Boston would be. Within forty-five minutes of receiving her memo, she had an appointment with a real estate agent to view some apartments that evening. Several hours later, under a pink sky that was bleeding into purple above the harbor, she fell in love with a bright renovated loft with a balcony that was a fifteen minute walk from the train station and a ten minute walk from the shopping district. La Mer cream was still not in the budget, but at least she would finally get the North Shore apartment she always wanted, even if it was on her own.

"I've signed a lease on an apartment in Marblehead, and I'm going to start staying there tonight," Quinn announced to Gil two days later. "And I've drafted a Separation Agreement," she said, handing him a manila envelope. "It's standard and any court would find it reasonable. You can either buy me out of my share of the condo or we can sell it and split the proceeds. I'm not fighting over dishes and furniture—just give me a list of what you want to keep. Alimony is obviously not an issue. You're welcome to have an attorney review it, but I think we can do this cheaply and quickly on our own."

Gil merely nodded his head, as if this had been expected. "Bitch," she thought she heard him say as she as she exited the condo, or maybe it was her imagination. But it didn't matter anymore. She would soon be watching the sunset over the harbor and she no longer owed him anything.

Quinn entered her office a half-hour late. She was still adjusting to the longer commute from Marblehead and had missed the train that would allow her to arrive at work at her usual time. “Shit,” Quinn muttered when she saw the petition from the Board of Bar Overseers on her desk. A complaint had been filed because she failed to report her plea agreement as required by the Rules of Professional Conduct. The envelope had been opened by her assistant Grace, as all her mail was, so news of her pending suspension was probably spreading through texts and hushed phone conversations throughout the firm. “*This challenge is an opportunity*,” Quinn could hear Marla saying. “*This is a chance to practice the 10th Step, and promptly admit when you are wrong.*” If nothing else, Quinn thought, she should disclose the complaint to her supervising partner James before he found out from someone else.

“James?” she said, standing outside his door, momentarily distracted by the growing bald patch on the crown of his head, which was bent over reading a brief.

“Is this important?” he asked, not looking up. “I have a hearing this afternoon.”

“I’m afraid it is.” She knew if she asked to meet later she might lose her courage.

James sighed and looked up. “Shoot.”

“I was arrested for an OUI about three months ago. My first. I pled out. Unfortunately I wasn’t aware that you were supposed to file a Notice of Conviction with the Board of Bar Overseers and they’ve filed a petition for an administrative suspension pending a hearing.”

“Jesus, Quinn. Why didn’t you file a Notice? Didn’t the court tell you to?”

"I'm sorry. I don't remember, it was a bit of a blur."

"And you didn't think to ask anybody here for help?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't think it was that big a deal."

"A first offense OUI is not a big deal, but a failure to report is a serious violation of the Rules."

"It wasn't intentional. It's just a misunderstanding, I'm sure it'll get cleared up. I'll attend the hearing and it won't affect my bar license."

"But you don't know that for sure," he said, crossing his arms and rolling his head back. "And now when clients research you on the BBO database, it will show that you have a pending disciplinary proceeding."

"I...believe so."

"Well, until you get this cleared up, you're going to have to withdraw from your cases. We can't have you as the attorney of record. Perhaps we can use you as a paralegal on some matters."

"I understand. I'm sorry."

"And if you can't bill clients, we're going to have to reconsider your compensation."

"I understand. I won't disappoint you again, I promise."

James returned to his work dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

Quinn walked down the hallway quickly, not wanting to run into anybody on her way out. Her face flushed at the thought of returning the next day and asking Grace to file Notices of Withdrawal for her cases. And the thought of other associates going to court to argue her briefs and get all the credit from the clients and partners made her clench her fists. *Be grateful*, she reminded herself. *You're still employed, you have a great apartment, and you're no longer responsible for your*

dead weight of an ex. But instead of gratitude, she was overtaken by a tsunami of anger. *Fuck all of you*, she thought. *I deserve better. I'm one of the best attorneys here.*

Quinn stopped at the liquor store by her apartment. She felt ridiculous for having thought that she had some disease that meant it was forbidden to her. Her name was Quinn, she was NOT an alcoholic, and she was going to drink. What was the point of having a balcony with harbor view if she couldn't enjoy it with a martini? It wasn't like she was going to have to appear in court the following day. Hell, she wasn't even sure she was going to go to the office the next day. She strolled through the aisles, enchanted by the hues of the liquor which reminded her of precious stones: amber brown, sapphire blue, ruby red, emerald green. Her mouth watered, triggered by the taste memories of salty margaritas and sweet amaretto sours. She grabbed a bottle of Smirnoff vodka before reconsidering. *What the fuck, it's a special occasion*, she thought, replacing the Smirnoff with a bottle of Grey Goose. She grabbed a bottle of triple sec and a lemon by the register, and began to feel giddy.

She had made a promise and had been given a promise in return. The program had told her that her life would improve if she followed certain rules. No drinking. Do the work that is offered to you. Make amends to those you've harmed. But it had all amounted to nothing. She entered her apartment and put her phone on silent before tossing it the couch, thinking that Marla would probably call if she did not see her at the meeting tonight. The Brenda Lee song came to her mind: "I'm sorry, so sorry..." she sang. The thought of apologizing to yet another person struck her as hysterical.

Quinn poured the vodka into a silver shaker and shook it vigorously. She searched her cabinet for the right glass, and her hand gravitated towards the hand-painted martini glass that she had received at her bachelorette party years ago. She held it to the light, appreciating how the silver paint and decorative crystals sparkled. She had been a different person when she last drank from this glass. A bride-to-be with a rocketing career who only felt the need to apologize for how happy she was.

How long had it been since the Night of the Lemon Drop Martinis with Ben? Three months and four days. And what did she have to show for it? She had her journal, which included her fourth step “moral inventory” of her “defects of character” and “shortcomings.” She had a 24-hour chip, a week chip, a one-month chip, a two-month chip, and the three-month chip, which she had received only a few days ago. As Marla stood beside her with her beatific smile, Quinn had spoken about how wonderful AA was, how she had been humbled, how life wasn’t perfect but was getting better. But she realized now it was just words, lip service to a program that she didn’t really need and that didn’t work anyway. Those silly chips had been, she admitted, great motivation, and the thought of starting over again with the 24-hour chip had been enough to keep her from a glass of wine on many nights. But not tonight, she thought, as she poured the vodka into her martini glass. She walked out to her balcony and lifted the glass to her lips, knowing that she would feel better very soon. □