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The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol
Ann DOWSETT Johnston'71

Years ago, I started having one or two glasses of wine in the evening. I was a busy journalist and a mother of a young son. Racing in from a long day at the office, laden with groceries, about to chop vegetables and prepare dinner, I would pour myself a glass of wine: an unhitch-the-shoulders-from-the-earlobes drink to ease myself into the second shift.

Gradually, as my responsibilities grew, two glasses morphed into three. After a hard day, wine helped me make the transition from one role to another. It numbed my burgeoning anxiety and depression. And it helped me fall asleep.

And then, in a time of crisis and deep loneliness, three glasses became four. Falling asleep became passing out. And when that happened, I blew the whistle on myself: I quit drinking. I was a high-functioning alcoholic who never crashed a car, never missed work. Still, after years of daily drinking, I was in serious trouble. I was in my fifties when this happened, going through menopause. As they say, the full catastrophe.

For a long, long time, alcohol was my able partner, providing welcome support. Many women will identify with this to some degree: how many of us have a nightly drink to unwind?

For years, I didn't think I had a problem because my drinking didn't look like my mother's. But if she was the poster girl of the 70s, mixing Valium and cocktails, I am the modern poster girl: a well-educated professional who soared at work and used alcohol to downshift at night.

Turns out, I am far from alone. The new face of risky drinking is female. In fact, the richer the country, the smaller the gap between male and female consumption.

We live in an alcogenic culture. Walk into most social gatherings and the first thing you will be asked is: "Red or white." We are expected to know our wines, and we are expected to handle our liquor.

Fair enough. But how many of us have really absorbed the low-risk drinking guidelines? How many of us appreciate that our gender has become the target of alcohol marketers? We have our very own feminized drinking culture, with wines like Girls' Night Out and Mommyjuice and Cupcake. How many of us appreciate that alcohol is a carcinogen, implicated in 15% of breast cancer cases? And how many of us appreciate that we are closing the gender gap on risky drinking—fast?

This is why I wrote my new book. *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol* is part memoir, part journalistic examination of a global epidemic in women's drinking. This is why I launched the National Roundtable on Girls, Women and Alcohol this year, along with the Canadian Women's Health Network. Are we having an adult conversation about our favourite drug? I don't think so. As intelligent, educated girls and women, it's time we started.