



## **Five O'Clock Somewhere**

**By Julia Tracey**

When he comes in from the garage after work, he kicks the door shut behind him with his foot and walks into the kitchen. He opens the liquor cabinet with one hand and gets out the scotch, setting it on the counter with a thump. He reaches for a highball glass and, from the freezer, fills it with ice. The cubes clink into the glass with a distinctive ring that I can hear from anywhere in the house. He untwists the cap and pours the amber liquid over the rocks until it reaches the rim.

Only then does he set down his briefcase and shuck his coat from his shoulders.

He doesn't add water or soda, no mixers of any sort. "The ice melts and dilutes the scotch," he always says. "I don't need to water it down."

I'm making dinner, helping kids with homework. (It's a beautiful thing, Suburbia, where everything runs like clockwork. You get married, quit your job, buy your house and have your babies. You send them to school; you put them in catechism, take them to soccer and tap and ballet, you volunteer for Girl Scouts, to chair the PTA carnival, to help in the classroom. After school you put your own work aside and spend the hours with the kids, doing crafts or earning merit badges. When Daddy comes home, dinner is cooking, and it's no Hamburger Helper; it's something Tuscan or Szechwan that you cooked from scratch, and there's the sourdough loaf hot from the bread machine, and the wine from Trader Joe's; there's the salad with the homemade croutons and the tomatoes, rosy and still warm from the yard. There's a bowlful of lemons from the neighbor's tree, and an apple pie, no, really, though the kids won't eat it and he'll be having a slice or two after

dinner because he likes the late-night snack. It's all there in the evening when Daddy gets home, because that's what it is to be a stay-at-home mom; those are the wages of a lush life, and there's no cause for complaint.)

There's a certain face he makes when he takes his first sip – something somewhere between the pained grimace that comes with a headache and the look of a man given cool water in the desert. In Scotland that first sip – the warmth of peat and smoke and pure water from the loch, distilled into the elixir called *uisge beatha*, the water of life, pure Scotch whiskey – it's called The Golden Trail. He relishes the sensation, loves it the way I love chocolate and Jane Austen and a good massage.

He passes the glass across his forehead if it's hot outside. If it's cold out, he might shiver but chews the ice nonetheless. He heads out to the studio, what we call our family room and my office, separate from the rest of the house. He turns on the computer and shuts the door. We don't see him until dinner.

He pours another drink for dinner, and another afterward, always with the ice clinking in the glass and the scotch topping off the ice. The sip. The sigh. The savor. Sometimes he asks the girls to pour one for him, and they do. I remember that from my childhood – my father asking me or my sisters to pour just two fingers, or maybe three. With my husband, some nights it's gin and tonic, with a little wedge of lime. Sometimes it's something else; he'll go on a kick with something and drink it to death, then move on to the next flavor.

He went through a long stint of drinking Manhattans every night, with the maraschino cherry and the sticky residue in the glass, and once someone gave us a big jug of pureed guava. He made guava-ritas for days until that was gone. In the cupboard or the

refrigerator are all the little glass jars of olives, of cocktail onions, the Angostura bitters and the special sugar or coarse salt for whatever he was drinking. Sometimes he would say he was just going to drink wine or beer for a while, to ease off the hard stuff and give his system a rest; he kept beer mugs in the freezer, iced and ready, and sometimes drank his wine out of a little jelly jar, like a peasant, and like his father used to do. He calls the bottle opener a church key. He calls the liquor "hooch."

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When I first saw this man he was a priest, gliding along the red carpeted aisle to the front of the church, where he sang the Mass, his arms outstretched like the Crucifixion above him. His voice echoed through the church, "The Lord be with you!"

"And also with you," the congregation responded.

"Let us pray." And he'd read the words in the Lectionary, or the Sacramentary, with his hands raised just so, with his palm up or his hand slicing sideways, blessing the Word, the people, the wafer and wine.

"He took the cup and again He gave You thanks and praise, saying, 'Do this in remembrance of Me.'"

From my seat I see Father --- kneel reverently on the carpet behind the altar, and tears fill my eyes. He is such a holy man. *I want to be good like that, Father. I want to be good. Take me. Show me the Way.*

The wine becomes the Blood of Christ. We pass through the line, a slow shuffle, and I take my turn sipping from the communal cup, my eyes averted from the floating bit of Jesus in the cup, my mind turning from the knowledge of so many lips against the rim. As we return to our pews, the sacristans clean up after the sacred meal. Someone always

has to finish the last of the wine; the Blood of the Lamb can't just be poured down the drain, not even the special drain in the sacristy that flows directly to the ground. He drinks it down. The chalice is wiped with a linen cloth, a white one with a little red cross embroidered on it.

“The Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve each other.”

“Thanks be to God.”

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With the first drink he relaxes and unwinds from work, or the rigors of the weekend or the holiday. With the second he becomes jovial and has another cigarette. With the third he becomes your best friend, and shares secrets and stories with you, and you find yourself confessing details about your life, and having impassioned debates, and then giving him a blowjob in the rectory. You see others opening their hearts to him, and how they laugh until they cry, how he laughs with that rippling warmth and you know why you love him, you remember the damp in your panties from every illicit night and every secret Sunday after Mass.

With the fourth drink he gets mean. All the things he's thinking but won't say during the long daylight hours come out with Number Four. If he gets to Five, he gets meaner. If he gets to Six, he loses it. At Four he calls me a fucking bitch in front of friends, tells me and others that I ruined his life; he tells his best friend that the priesthood is a waste of time and that the friend is fucking stupid to stay in. At Five he yells at the goddamned kids, he sinks into a sullen funk, he slurs his words and wants to watch “Real Sex” or gay porno, with me or without. At Six he forgets my name, asks if the sexy neighbor is

coming to bed with us, leers down the cleavage of a friend, breaks things and doesn't remember. With each round, the ice clinks in the glass like the chimes of a church bell.

Daddy falls asleep on the couch at around 11, and is impossible to shake out of it. He lies there, twitching and snoring, until I finally get through the fog and walk him upstairs, where he falls across the bed, and I have to push and pull to get his clothes off, and over to his side of the small bed. At night he breathes the stale breath of scotch and garlic and cigarettes, and he kicks off the covers and lies there, naked, his flesh curled and limp and reeking of alcohol through every pore. He throws an arm over me in the night, heavy as iron, an elbow in the eye, a toenail sharp in the back of the knee, and doesn't understand why I'm not interested in sex anymore.

We were on several occasions given homemade elixirs for Christmas, someone's effort at peach brandy or cherry Schnapps, and it sat for months until we were out of hooch and had no money to spare, and then he drank it. "It's really not bad," he said, shrugging as the sweetness swirled around his teeth.

He drank the cooking sherry I sometimes used to buy; I always knew it would disappear before I could make use of it. He drank the brandy I bought for holiday baking and eggnogs. When he got the urge to have a special dessert, he'd go through his favorite recipes: Kahlua brownies, Bailey's Irish Cream cheesecake, or a special liqueur-flavored poundcake. Some nights he would look through the cupboards, pulling out the children's cough syrup and the vanilla extract I got from Mexico, or sniff at the mouthwash in the bathroom and joke, "I'm not that far gone." But there is an ache, a need there, and somewhere we find the money for hooch when there is none for milk; the ice clinks in the glass, and all is right with the world.

One time we had a holiday open house in the late afternoon, and by seven o'clock all the guests were gone. Around eight o'clock the parish priest came by with a large shopping bag full of bottles. "I cleaned out the liquor cabinet," he crowed, showing me dusty bottles of Dubonnet, sherry, bourbon, brandy, vodka from who knew how many months or years before, their labels stained and peeling from the dark uncharted recesses of the dank rectory closet. "Here's the party," he said, with evident cheer.

I looked at the sack and told him, "That's my next two months."

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And once in a while he goes on the wagon. "I'm not gonna drink anymore," he tells me time and again. "It's making me fat."

He burns through the cigs instead, and sinks into a black funk like swamp mud, stops talking to me, to us, swimming instead in the morass of whatever shit it is that tortures him – how his father died and left him, a 10-year-old boy, with an elderly mother to care for, how the priests took him and made a man of him, how the priest or seminarian had sex with him and left him wondering if he was straight or gay, the unanswered question of should he have left the priesthood, should he have stayed, and the endless wants and needs of the wife and three children and the mortgage and minivan he said he wanted.

Whatever it is that gnaws at him makes him want to drive the car into the oncoming headlights, makes him contemplate buying a gun or taking enough pills to fall asleep, as long as it looks like an accident. The insurance money will cover everything, he says. "I'm worth more dead than alive," he says, joking in that way that is never really particularly funny.

At the end, when I knew, I finally knew that if he didn't stop drinking it would be the end of us, that I couldn't handle anymore of the merry-go-round of drinkie/no drinkie, he stopped (for me, he said), went through the funk for months, and then on New Year's Eve, he announced, as we walked through the door of the restaurant, "I'm gonna drink tonight."

The waitress led us to our seats.

"I'll have a double scotch," he said, and had another, and after wine with dinner and the glass of Champagne for the midnight toast, when the mistress of ceremonies came around from table to table to ask people what their New Year's resolutions were, she held the microphone toward him and he said, in that convivial way that is so much his style, "I want a new wife." Then the horns began to blare and squall and the band began to play "Auld Lang Syne," and he pulled me up against him and said, "You're gonna give me a real kiss for once."

All the way back to the house, a few blocks away, he tripped and stumbled, and as we approached, he thought it would be funny to sneak around the back of the house to scare the kids and the babysitter, waiting alone for us to return. Instead, I opened the door and quickly called out to the kids, and everyone said "Happy New Year," and I ushered the kids upstairs to bed.

By the time I came downstairs again, he was asleep on the couch.