

Pernod: A Love Story

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Sarah Harley

I drank to stay numb, and I drank because I was afraid. I drank to blur the edges of the day, and I drank to fall asleep.

– Joan Didion

The Pernod bottle holds memories from childhood – vivid and visceral. Star anise and fennel; liquorice, lemon, marzipan, and salt. Fragments of life are set adrift without context. A ghost lingers at the edge of my vision – swirling the bitter with the sweet; she haunts my memory of love. In a green silk dress, she is elegant and dangerous, misunderstood. The first sip always evokes something half-remembered, bitter herbs and damp earth, the memory of a garden after rain— as if the past was dissolved into a single glass.

If you are reading this, tell someone I was here.

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We go to Concarneau every summer, a small, walled port town on the southern coast of Brittany.

At the first light of dawn, the fishermen ready their nets. The sea is still blue black. They cast the nets like wings opening out into the water. One boat drags one net. Gulls circle and swoop overhead, restless and elegant, their white wings like flashes of silver. The first threads of light form along the horizon.

In the afternoon, by the harbour, my mother drinks aniseed aperitifs, to blur the edges of the day. For the time being, things will remain unsaid. Moments around her will carry on: the clink of a glass, the flick of a match. This is the version of her I can never reach.

Inside, the hotel dining room smells of bouillabaisse, a rich fish broth. The diners taste it at tables, tearing pieces of bread. You can hear the sound of a spoon dragging across a shallow

bowl. People move around the room, taking away plates, returning with others. Plates of fish, with silver iridescent skin, are balanced on trays, arranged with slices of lemon and fresh green herbs.

Sitting there, I feel unseen and adrift. I want to be seen but I am afraid of being seen. I am seven.

The rest of the family are quietly focusing on the task of eating in silence – my father, my sisters, and my brother. I am learning how to read the room, how you can cut the air with a knife. The room hums with the vibration of abandonment.

In silence, I watch my mother outside on the harbour. She's sitting alone at a small table, angled towards the water. She has just learned about the affair. It's not the first of my father's infidelities, but the weight still presses against her as if it was. Instead of naming the pain, she folds inward; I wonder if she is thinking of sailing away into the sea.

Later on, she will pack her suitcase and tell us she is leaving. I know she won't go; she will create an even deeper kind of distance by staying. In six years, she will pass away, which will strangely create an even deeper kind of closeness.

The window is streaked with sea mist, forming a frame around my mother sipping her drink and smoking a cigarette. A waiter sets down another glass in front of her, filled with an inch or so of a golden liquid, tinted with a green hue, along with a carafe of still water. For a moment, the liquid catches all the light. This is the glittering light. My mother slowly adds water to the glass, which quickly turns the liquid cloudy. I watch as she holds the glass into the light coming off the blue sea. All sparkling is gone, all the light scattered.

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Pernod, my mother's summer drink, comes in a tall and slender bottle, made of green glass. A label displays the name in bold white letters, set against a strip of bright red. It is the oldest anise liqueur in France, infused from distillates of star anise and fennel, and other botanicals like angelica root, mint, and hyssop. The original Pernod Fils contained absinthe – derived from a

holy trinity of wormwood (*artemisia absinthium*) – a silvery-green plant – macerated in alcohol then blended with green anise and Florence fennel.

The liquor was believed to induce hallucinations and convulsions, triggering mental illness and provoking violent behavior. People believed its high alcohol content unlocked doors in the mind, doors that could never be fully closed once opened. Its pale green colour led to its nickname – the green fairy, a seductive, otherworldly figure, a glowing apparition who beckons you from the bottom of a glass. She drew those who drank it into a trance-like state, a world of fleeting and intoxicating visions.

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Green inside a bottle, almost luminescent. When poured into my glass, the liquid moves smoothly, capturing glints of golden light. When water is added, the glass turns opaque yellow, a milky swirling yellow. This is the diffused light.

I've always been drawn to things that change their appearance, elusive and shifting, depending on lighting and angle, governed by properties of iridescence and translucence. Dragonfly wings and silk, the surface of water. Opalescent glass appears blue from the side, but glows from within when you turn it towards the light.

In a heavy glass tumbler, I swirl the liquid, faint and shimmering. I am drinking to become numb. I've just lost my mother and my brother. I don't know why, but we don't speak about it. I am fifteen.

The silence creates a distance, an absence layered invisibly over the others. It forms a dead weight I have to carry inside me. This is the shaping of my life, in which I learn to stay quiet and invisible. I learn to disconnect, feeling a drifting sense of self, as though my control over who I am is already slipping.

Close to me, a man is leaning up against the bar.

“I mean, the more water you drink after drinking Pernod, the drunker you’ll get,” he says, flashing a smile.

I take a sip. My mouth fills with sweetness and memory.

There are lights behind him, framing his silhouette. His eyes inch over my body. Unlike me, he’s old enough to be there, perhaps in his mid-twenties. I look down at the floor, at his scuffed work boots, then glance up at his eyes, still on me. A wave of fear goes through me. I look out into the crowd for my friend Emma – my first drinking friend.

Sometimes we pour blackcurrant juice into the glass, turning its color a deep, verdant green, almost black. It takes on a dimensionality beyond itself. We like to drink it neat, without ice or water. With the blackcurrant juice added, we can knock it back quickly, shaking our heads as a sharp shudder rushes through our bodies.

The men watch us, leaned against the bar, their shirt sleeves rolled up. They are drinking tall shiny cans of lager. It is, after all, a working man’s club. On Friday nights, we are torn about which lies to tell and whether or not to go there but the place has a bar and a dance floor and that’s all we need. Its official name is the Teignbridge 76 Social Club, on Marsh Road. To get there, we walk through town, along the River Lemon, minding our make-up in the rain. We walk past Victorian terraces and old railway tracks. Because we look older, in our short skirts and black boots, no one bothers to ask for our ID.

After a few drinks, the night becomes a liquid version of itself.

The music sounds as if it’s coming from faraway– synthing, and repeating, but unable to fully travel through the soft haze of Pernod enclosing my mind. Even though the sound is trapped on the outside, I can still feel the muffled noise as if through a closed door or a ceiling. Inside there’s only silence, expanding like a fog.

The intoxication creates a quiet space; this is the place I learn to love without knowing it.

Pernod is rooted in the south of France, especially Provence. I imagine plane trees forming canopies, filtering sunlight into dappled patterns. At dusk, a soft and golden light falls across a shaded terrace. Lovers hold hands.

In a bar, I tell a story to a man. He leans in with fascination. I see it forming in his eyes, like kaleidoscope flakes, catching both light and shadow, darting this way and that, one way and another. I wonder whether I will fall in love with him. I am twenty-five.

“We went to France every summer when I was a kid,” I began.

He interrupts, leaning in further, asking questions.

“What was the closest city? Do you remember the name of the hotel?”

The bar has become a liminal space, existing at the threshold of states of being, suspended between one version of me and another. I feel anxious, as if I am under interrogation. His questions cause my mind to fray at its edges, then begin to unravel. Strands of memory unwind like twine.

“I remember the hotel room. High windows, closed shut at night with white wooden shutters. There were bolster pillows on the bed, and green glass bottles on a dressing table, reflected in a mirror.”

I can hear the sound of my parents fighting, their voices rising and falling.

He nods, listening intently; I begin to feel hypnotized, and drunk. Time collapses; I find a passageway through it.

“You enter the hotel through a tall door, topped with a glass transom window, painted glossy black. There’s a black and white tile floor.”

I remember the small squares, small bare feet, still covered in sand from the beach across the road.

I feel far away.

“So what happened to you?” he finally asked.

I feel myself landing, finding my way back to a narrative, to the threading of time.

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In Concarneau, we go to a place called The Fisherman’s Café, at the edge of the harbor — its interior is etched in my memory like a miniature room in a doll’s house, every detail fixed and strange. Small tables tucked against the walls, covered with red and white tablecloths; old rattan chairs, with woven seats and backrests. On the walls are faded black and white photographs of the past: fisherman hauling in their nets, their wool caps pulled low over dark eyes; Breton women dressed in long dark skirts and heavy wool shawls, white aprons and lace headdresses. No-one in the pictures smiles for the camera. Behind them is the silhouette of *La Ville Close* — the old walled city.

The back of the restaurant opens to an area near the harbor, where wooden boats bob on the water. There’s a weather-worn rope, looped around iron mooring rings, embedded into the harbor's quay walls.

I am six.

We sit at one of the tables. The waiter refills my mother’s wine glass. Another bottle is left. She lights a cigarette. My father attempts to appear calm.

Suddenly, there’s a noisy clattering sound followed by hushed grownup voices. A man has fallen backwards in his chair. He hits the floor with a loud thud. A glass shatters. Everyone turns to stare as he thrashes from side to side. Left to right, left to right. He kicks his legs as if he is swimming. The memory is stored in my nerves forever.

I stare at the man’s face, deeply lined, drawn and contorted. His mouth is apart, as if he is trying to shout only no sound comes out. I wonder what he is trying to say. His eyes are wide, almost

all pupils in dark black. Then the eyes roll upwards and disappear. Grownups rush over, kneeling next to him. A woman cradles his head.

My mother stands up quickly, pushing her chair back, and grabs me by the wrist, and my sister too because we are the smallest. We are dragged outside into the bright light of the harbour. I clutch onto the rope because I feel afraid. But still we look into the darkness of the restaurant. Everyone is still staring, others are standing in quiet groups, with glazed expressions.

Then the memory breaks up; there's an interruption, a rupture – a break in the scene that I won't remember. Was there an ambulance? A death in the afternoon?

I spend years trying to reassemble the scene, putting one person here and another there. I find myself remembering incidental details: the tablecloths, green glass bottles, bread baskets. Then I reach the hush that fell over the room, the silence laced with shame.

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A man in a bar reads to me from his phone:

Pour one jigger absinthe into a Champagne glass. Add iced Champagne until it attains the proper opalescent milkiness. Drink three to five slowly.

It's a drink called Death in the Afternoon, invented by Ernest Hemingway. A memory breaks loose; a door opens in my mind. I am thirty-three.

Ordering more drinks, the man explains that Hemingway drank absinthe regularly in Paris in the 1920s – just after World War I, during an era of disillusion and exhaustion. He speaks about the emotional numbness that runs through his fiction and his characters, how alcohol often fills the space carved out by aimlessness and longing. It's a world I recognize, where everyone is in love with someone they can't have, drinking the day down to nothing.

No one ever says how they really feel.

I think about my mother, sipping her aperitifs in the silent afternoon, turning inward before vanishing completely. My mother isn't celebrating, she is withdrawing into lost time. She is crossing a bridge to elsewhere, drinking to her own exile. This is her ritual of survival: pour, sip, disappear.

The Pernod bottle is the marker to my mother's inner world, the place she loves, where she is locked inside herself, where there's no longing, nothing to feel.

The bottle shapes the passage of time, measured out in jiggers and shot glasses – moments of tension, absence and longing. Each sip leaves a trace of what was deeply hidden, residues of shame – guilt and silence, the abdication of emotion.

It is the keeper of stories never told, all things unspoken, everything that was hidden beneath the surface. It holds the moments when the world silently shifted, nights when the fights started with no end.

I wonder what has been passed down?

I drink because I have inherited something from my mother – a desire to blur the edges of the day, to lighten the weight of what is missing. This is the truth of the message in the bottle: the green glass holds the smallest, most watchful version of me, sweet and luminous.

If you are reading this, tell her I was here.