

Two Fingers of Bourbon

Susan Thornton

It's as near as her hand and she can smell it. Two fingers of amber fluid catch the light on the tray table to her left. Her seatmate, a man in his early sixties, is asleep, breathing through his mouth, thick lips slightly parted. Thirty thousand feet above the Great Plains, cruising between clouds and stars, and the man sitting next to her hasn't even finished his drink.

Elizabeth stares at the dark oval window to her left and sees a narrow, tense face, deeply furrowed and pushed forward like a fist. This face has served her to good advantage in committee meetings at the west coast university where she is Dr. Sedgewick, full professor of anthropology, with two books and more than one hundred articles to her credit.

The laptop she holds, closed as tightly as a vault, contains a file with rough drafts for her latest article on leadership among the warring Maori tribes of New Zealand, promised to her publisher in two weeks. With her long slender hand, so like her mother's, she strokes the ridged plastic surface. The smell grows stronger—sugar, the promise of oblivion, one swift swallow of the golden liquid. . . . She shifts in her seat, dabs at her temples with the embroidered handkerchief she took from the drawer of the nightstand at her mother's room at the nursing home. She leans forward, feels the pull of the seatbelt at her waist, sinks back into her seat.

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As she followed the stooped shoulders of the priest, her heels clicked on the marble floor, echoing through the nearly empty chapel. She remembered Father Bill's arrival in the parish thirty years before—a wide, square, self-important figure, with a booming voice. Now he has the surgical survivor's careful walk. Flakes of dandruff dotted his stole. In the second pew sat Helen, her mother's friend, who waved her hand in a crocheted glove. And there, was that Steve Wrighter, the museum director, hunched in a wheelchair? The attendant hadn't even pushed him into the body of the chapel; he sat squinting against the glare from the door. Surprised and relieved, she found Jane's flushed face,

bright with a pair of quite ridiculous hornrims. Next to her, in a dove gray suit, sat Katherine, every glossy hair in place. Elizabeth nodded, attempted a smile. Father Bill shuffled forward and she slipped into the first pew, gathered her skirt beneath her, and sat. Jane leaned forward to touch her shoulder. At once Elizabeth's eyes flooded with tears.

After the service she stood in the hall with Jane and Katherine. "It's funny that your mother's funeral is today," Jane said. "I mean, it's not funny, it's—" She ran her fingers along her lapel. "It's just. . . ironic."

Elizabeth looked at her.

Kat sighed. "There's another funeral right after this one—Pete Maris's mother."

"Pete Maris."

"She was eighty-three," put in Jane. "She died on Monday. They don't know what to do here at the church. She was on the Meals on Wheels committee and scheduled to drive this week."

"She still drove?"

"And organized all the volunteers. It was very sudden."

"And he's here?"

"Pete? He's staying at her house. He flew in from Texas."

"He didn't stay in Rochester?"

"Oh, no, he moved on ages ago." Jane adjusted her challis scarf.

"And what's he doing in Texas?"

"Who knows. Cutting a wide swath."

Kat flashed Jane a look.

"Sorry. But you remember Pete. Listen, can we take you to lunch?"

"No." Elizabeth tugged at her pearl earring. "I made a tight plane connection, and I still have to pick up some things at the motel. . . ."

And so she was standing in the red-carpeted hallway of the church when Pete pushed open the door. He was turned away from her as he spoke to someone outside. Then he strode in with that familiar loose-jointed stride. In the instant she saw him changed and unchanged, twenty-one and nearly fifty, how could it have been so many years? His dark curly hair was touched with gray; his face deeply lined, but as familiar as if her fingers had just left it, the high cheekbones and jutting nose, the narrow lips. She didn't know where to look, what to do with her hands. She knew herself stupid, unattractive, and then he hugged her. His arms went around her middle aged bulk and she rested her head against his bony shoulder. How she wished she hadn't worn her worsted suit; it added so many inches. "I'm sorry," he said in her ear. "I'm so sorry."

"It's tough," she heard herself telling him. "It's so tough."

"And it gets tougher as we get older, baby."

"I'm sorry about your loss too, Pete." They stood slightly apart and all at once she was awkward. Should she take her hand away? She wanted to cling to his arm.

"Skipper." A new voice. A fragile, older man in a banker's suit that hung off his frame.

"Ralph." Pete released her, took a step. "Ralph, you remember Liz Sedgewick, don't you? Liz, this is Ralph Harter."

Ralph Harter? That wasn't Ralph. Ralph Harter was robust, strong, even running to fat—her date at their junior prom. At Miss Skillin's the girls always had to chose their escorts. Geoff was the nice brother, but she asked Ralph. How they had struggled in his parked car under the country club lights, his rubbery lips wet on her face and neck, his hands moist on her organdy dress as he fought to get under her slip. Once home she vomited into the sink.

Pete's voice, "You remember Liz Sedgewick, don't you?"

And the stooped, gray old banker said, "Vaguely."

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The smell of bourbon fills her senses, recalling whole worlds: hot noisy clubs bright with flashing light and moving bodies, bar floors sprinkled with sawdust, rain against a window, the wheaty smell of hops in late afternoons. Her seatmate ordered his drink with ice; she recalls the clink of ice against her upper lip, the oily flow of liquor on her tongue, the cool delicious taste.

What would mother have done? She allows herself a small smile which vanishes into the clenched hand that squeezes the embroidered linen. R.P.S. Regina Pearson Sedgewick.

She could have stayed at the nursing home. The director offered her a guest room directly under the room where her mother—her mother Regina, the *cum laude* graduate of Wellesley college, who had presided confidently over so many glittering dinner tables, who had led the fund drive that saved the Philharmonic twenty-five years ago, who could recite many of Browning's dramatic monologues and knew Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum by heart—had lain for three years in a fetal position, wearing an adult diaper, felled first by Edward's lingering death from cancer, then by a series of strokes.

"It's a blessing, dear," Helen said at the service, clutching her wrist with the scratchy crocheted glove. Elizabeth wanted to strike her.

She dedicated her first book to her mother. Her mother had encouraged her just when Elizabeth was ready to give up, to leave the academy. That crucial weekend her mother called, suggested that she visit. Elizabeth flew to Rochester and arrived to find a fire crackling in the fireplace, her favorite red wine on the sideboard, a roast in the oven. While she slept all Saturday afternoon, Regina took her typescript and note cards—coffee-stained, dog-eared, a jumble of scrib-

ble and misnumbered pages—and hired a typist.

"What you need is a week off." Her mother was firm. "Look at you. You haven't been eating or sleeping or taking proper care of yourself at all. And as for this book, you're too close to it, you can't see it. Stay with us for a week, then go back to work."

Elizabeth acquiesced, sank into the upholstered couch, accepted the concert tickets, attended the neighborhood cocktail parties. She returned to the museum she had loved so as a child, and strolled again along the exhibits of the Seneca long house and Iroquois women pounding their maize. These three dimensional panoramas had sparked her imagination, had sent her more than halfway around the globe to find people, real people who looked like those quiet figures caught in mid-gesture.

Her mother was right. Elizabeth needed a week off. When the manuscript came back from the typist—her mother paid—she saw that it wasn't hopeless after all, that only one chapter was weak, that the body was solid, that it would do. She made her revisions and the finished manuscript was not only published, but became a documentary film which catapulted her career.

After she began her lecture tours, she accepted a speaking engagement at the University of Rochester and her mother called her in California, giddy as a girl. "You've no idea what a splash your talk is making. You should see the publicity."

Elizabeth knew pretty well how her agent marketed the talk, with a photo from her book jacket and some racy quotes.

"I've saved you all the cuttings."

"Don't bother, mother."

"What?"

"That's nice, mom, thanks." Elizabeth twisted the phone cord in her hand, looked out over the beach volleyball game. When she arrived in Rochester her parents met her at the airport. Edward, hale and hearty, insisted on getting her bag. "Why this isn't much luggage. To come all the way from California." He winked and she smiled.

"Do get in, dear," her mother craned her neck, peering out of the passenger side of the big Chrysler Imperial. "We're so glad to see you." In the first row of the auditorium Regina wore her best blue shantung and the long string of pearls. Her smile was incandescent with pride.

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Elizabeth looks to her left, then at her trembling hand. Such a small motion would capture the plastic cup. Even if her sleeping seatmate wakes and complains she can charm her way out of it, buy him another, and one for her-

self, they can talk, drink, keep each other company—company over Kansas—at thirty thousand feet.

Her hand clenches the handkerchief. Twelve years sober now and never a slip. Serenity comes and goes. The main thing is never to drink. At parties she always declines. "Doctor's orders." No one presses her.

She was always an alcoholic, she came later to believe, from that first vodka and orange juice as she sat crosslegged in the center of her narrow little bed at Wellesley. That night she had sent Pete away; rejected his proposal, said words ugly enough that he would believe. She knew she was right; marriage would only distract her; she wanted something more out of life. When she looked through the glass of the vodka bottle the Ferret Pain which crouched at the edge of the room bared his teeth but kept his distance. Vodka became her new companion on Saturday nights. After she opened a bottle, determined to stay in her room, she came to herself halfway across campus, searching for a friend. She was well-read enough to know that this was an alcoholic blackout. But how could she be an alcoholic? She only drank on Saturday. And in graduate school, when she was busy on her dissertation, and kept a bottle and a glass by the typewriter, she still completed her revisions on time. How could she be an alcoholic if she was a fellow at Harvard?

After she made tenure, in that eighth year, that miserable eighth year, teaching the same courses for the eighth time—when she began to lose weight she was pleased. Always stout, she was pleased to drop four sizes, then six. With one part of her mind she knew the reason—she fixed a meal and threw half of it away, preferring a third vodka and orange juice. Then her periods stopped. Her gums bled. Handfuls of hair clumped in her hairbrush; she took to a comb. She shrugged off even the incident in the student bar, when the bouncer asked her table to leave and she went home with one of the graduate students. She, Dr. Sedgewick.

Fortunately he was not a graduate student from her department. Fortunately she held her head high and looked through him when he smirked at her. Fortunately he accepted a fellowship elsewhere. Fortunately.

One day she awakened at noon and found an angry slash of red paint and a dent the size of a child's head in the fender of her car. Could she have? She hadn't had the car out. She hadn't driven at all. Or had she? She ran back into the house, dropped her keys twice as she tried to unlock the door. On the kitchen counter lay a crumpled paper bag from Liquor Square. She shook it—out fell a receipt dated the night before. The overhead lights blazed, a buzzing started in her ears. There was no one she could trust—no one. With shaking hands she lifted the telephone and called a taxi. At the hospital she demanded to be checked into rehab.

Crying so hard she could hardly breathe, she told her story to the coun-

selor, who nodded, grim, and called the police. No hit and run accidents had been reported. "You sideswiped someone's car," the counselor said. "Probably in your neighborhood. Are there hydrants on your street?"

"There's one in front of my house."

"Any skid marks?"

"I didn't notice."

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Since those first thirty days she has not had a drink. Maybe it's all right as long as she doesn't drive. How much damage can she do, imprisoned in her seat in tourist class? At the airport she can buy a bottle, check into the hotel, drink until the bottle's empty, then call room service for more. She knows it will take away this ache in her throat. She presses her fingers to her eyes.

If only she hadn't seen Pete. As they stood on the red carpet, nearly embracing, Elizabeth looked over his shoulder and blinked.

"This is Pete Junior," he said. "Come here, son, say hello to an old friend of your father's."

Elizabeth held out her hand. She had her breathing under control by the time the tall, slender woman in the dark blue suit came up. It was she who gave the boy his eyes.

"Honey, this is Liz Sedgewick; Liz, this is my wife, Sue."

Sue had a narrow hand and a cool, firm grip.

Elizabeth clutched the handkerchief to her chest. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I know you lost your mother, also," Sue said. Her voice was soft and melodious. "I'm so sorry."

Elizabeth shook her head and let the tears fall onto the worsted suit that added the inches to her waist.

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The bourbon on the tray table continues its soft whisper. Elizabeth knows that one swift swallow and the tightness in her throat will ease, that these memories will lose their power. She won't mind so much that her mother died without waiting for her, that she had seen Pete for the first time since she sent him away, that Ralph Harter looked like death itself. She has forgotten years of her vivid, brilliantly colored life: years. Most of all she has forgotten Pete—now she remembers how he looked as he sat up on the broad couch in her parents' basement rec room, still wearing all his clothes, stretching out his arms to her.

It was her mother who remarked, off-hand, when Elizabeth returned

from Wellesley after breaking off with Pete: "Pete Maris is a very nice young man, but not really suitable for you, is he, Liz dear?"

Elizabeth was setting the table. Instead of answering she asked, "Would you like to use your silver tonight, Mom, or great-grandmother's?"

"Let's use Gramm's," her mother answered. "The dinner service. It's so nice to set a special table when you're home, dear."

She might have married Pete. They might have had a child, children. Then she wouldn't be where she is now, Dr. Sedgewick, full professor of anthropology, with two books and more than a hundred articles to her credit.

When she met Elliott there was still time for children. She was thirty-six then, but Elliott had had the surgery and was adamant. Tom, his son from his first marriage, was HIV positive. He followed a strict macrobiotic diet, drank nothing but green tea, and professed to find his illness a "gift" that gave him "focus." He was tall, lean, played beach volleyball every Thursday, rollerbladed on Sunday afternoons.

Rebecca, Elliott's daughter from his second marriage, was a schizophrenic. She lived on the streets in Pasadena, obeying voices in her head, eating out of cans in dumpsters. "I'm clearly not meant to have children," Elliott said. "I've endured enough pain in my life." Part of his pain came from marriage, too, he asserted, therefore he wouldn't marry her. "Why ruin a good thing?" he asked, half-joking. "Look what a record of failure I have. Who'd want legal entanglements with me?" But Elizabeth wanted a marriage, wanted it badly.

Elizabeth rubs her forehead; the handkerchief comes away damp. Maybe it's not too late. If she could find a sperm bank and an obstetrician who would encourage a first pregnancy at forty-six what would Elliott do? Probably leave her. And at her age to bring a child into the world. A child who would be twenty-one when she was nearing seventy.

We have a good life, she thinks. They keep separate residences; from her deck she can watch the blazing sun sink into the Pacific. On weekends they drive to Baja. When she went to New Zealand he met her and they hiked in the mountains under the cerulean sky. It's a good life.

The bourbon winks at her from the tray table. "If it's such a good life," says the soft whisper, "why do you want me so much?"

"But I don't, I don't." Shocked, she realizes she has spoken aloud. Her cheeks flush; sweat trickles between her shoulder blades. She thinks again of Pete, of his hot, wet mouth, of the look on his face as he extended his arms to her.

A shadow comes across the light—a woman carrying a sleeping infant. The child's mouth is a perfect O, its chubby hands closed up in fists. Elizabeth stares—the woman's hair is shot with silver, crow's feet at her eyes give away her age.

"Mommy, go potty!" Silence is split by the shrill demand. Elizabeth's

companion stirs but does not wake. The man behind her chuckles; Elizabeth cranes her neck to see the sturdy toddler pulling her mother's free hand. This unknown woman with silver in her hair has two children.

"Yes, yes," says the woman. "At the end of the aisle. Go on." She smiles at Elizabeth, a weary, "please excuse me" smile. Elizabeth turns to the window.

The choice is hers. She can ring the stewardess. She can buy a drink. She can get a bottle at the airport. Maybe two bottles. She can check into the airport hotel, get more bottles from room service.

Or she can change seats. There is a telephone on the plane. In her purse is a list of names and phone numbers. She can use her telephone credit card and arrange to have someone meet her, take her to a meeting, or to a restaurant where she can spill her story over coffee and a formica table.

With sudden resolve she pushes the call button, wipes her palms with the embroidered handkerchief. The stewardess arrives, a blonde, bland face. Elizabeth opens her mouth to speak, and as she does so she has no idea what she will say. ◆