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Phi 227 – Incomplete

*Drinking: A Love Story*

### **Caroline Knapp: Sex, Drugs, and the Meaning of Life**

Born on November 8, 1959, Caroline Knapp was the daughter of a renowned psychoanalyst, Peter, and an artist, Jean. Raised in an upper-middle class family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Knapp attended Brown University, Class of 1981, and graduated magna cum laude from the Ivy League institution (Knapp 7). Most notably, Knapp was a contributor for *New Woman* magazine and a columnist at *The Boston Phoenix*, which regularly featured her fictional alter ego “Alice K” and her “social misadventures” (Phoenix). Before she died in 2002 due to complications from lung cancer, she had lived a double life: publicly successful and happy while simultaneously drinking her life away in private. First published in 1996, her novel *Drinking: a Love Story* accounts her life-long “unhappy, insecure, alcohol-soaked” bout with unrequited love, whether from her family, her significant others or the constant alcoholic drink in her hand, providing audiences with her personal coming-of-age tale and the discovery of purpose (Knapp 279).

Caroline Knapp: sister, daughter, intellectual, writer, lover...alcoholic. Although unable to pinpoint exactly what spurred Knapp down the road of alcoholism, she gradually fell into its grasp. Growing up, she always had an “unsafe feeling” which only alcohol could drive out, replacing it with a much desired “feeling of courage” (69; 70). In the simplest terms, her early childhood was confusing, with her father constantly analyzing her and her family lacking traditional warm and affectionate relationships. Her parents’ “silence” taught her, presumably, what adults look and act like, and the resulting lack of compassion noticeably impacted her development into maturity (97). Without witnessing their emotions firsthand or being taught that

it is acceptable to have them, Knapp resorted to drinking for a pseudo-gateway to feeling. Having her first drink at the young age of fourteen, drinking became the instrument of experiencing the range of human emotions, helping her cry, celebrate, or cope with stress and rage and anxiety (225; 155). However, she would soon find that the power alcohol temporarily gave her also “[robbed her] of it in equal measure” (95).

A secondary challenge to her childhood was the impact mass media had on her development, allowing the need for material goods and presence of alcohol to be “culturally reinforced” (60). If anyone in society felt empty inside, the media told them to fill it up with an “external solution,” such alcohol, clothes, or men (61). Present in books, television shows and commercials, billboards, magazine ads, and movies, Caroline Knapp was raised with a distinct correlation between drinking and “camaraderie...machismo...and sophistication” (63). Mass media also distorted her view of her own maturing sexuality, acquiring that knowledge from observing celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe or Mary Tyler Moore, simply suggesting to either become a “sex bomb” or a “good girl” without much guidance to avoid “shame or sexual inferiority” (83; 137). Combining an emerging adult’s “shyness and...confusion” with a couple of beers to soothe and protect that ache, Knapp’s unhealthy relationship with alcohol and herself flourished into unhealthy relationships with others (84; 63).

Through this influence of American culture, Knapp believed that she had “to sexualize [any] relationship in order to feel powerful” and “drink in order to feel sexual” (95). Within this mindset, she grew “fearful of sexuality,” unable to fully contemplate the fact that she was “young and scared and sexually threatened and angry,” turning to alcohol in order to wash those fears and anxieties away (142). Losing her identity in a drink, Knapp and females in similar situations were never taught that they were “*allowed* to say no,” whether to a drink or an unwanted sexual advance (84). Sex became an unfamiliar territory, that of which Knapp drank to

deal with its resulting terror and foreign confusion, drinking to numb “fear and feelings of inadequacy” in order to feel “attractive” and “loose” within the drunken illusion of intimacy (84; 78). Compared to the models in magazines and the unwelcoming relationship with her own parents, Knapp’s environment taught her that she was inadequate and that drinking too much was merely a sign of “weakness” or a “lack of self-restraint” (128). Conversely, she claimed that it was also “foreign” to abstain completely from drinking in the “alcohol-saturated world” she lived in (255; 267). Caught between two extremes of abstinence and alcoholism, Knapp’s social anxiety and turbulent childhood catalyzed her into a severe dependence on alcohol, happily losing and leaving herself behind in the process.

Constantly searching for approval, Caroline Knapp was not truly able to approve of herself until after she checked into a rehabilitation facility. While she had been dependent on drinking, she had stopped “trusting [her] instincts and...behavior” and became uneasy about how comfortable she could potentially feel with human compassion and genuine comfort, not the kind found at the bottom of a bottle (238; 277). Lost without the “chaos and drama” of an explosive relationship, she “drank instead” and quickly fell in love with alcohol (277; 96). The chemical substance alone taught her about “passion, sensual pleasure...fears, yearning hungers,” needing something so terribly that it was “crippling” without it and eventually leaving her unable to imagine a life without its influence (5). In another context, those words may be heartbreakingly beautiful and relatable, perhaps about a first love or past lover. However, this “most important relationship in [her] life” was with an addictive substance, ending in a “divorce,” where the quasi-physical attraction would never completely die although the relationship might have (5; 268).

For decades of her life, alcohol had “shielded” Caroline Knapp from “the messy business...with [her] emotions, coming to terms with [her] own quiet, restrained, complicated

heritage,” providing an illusion that she was capable of tending to her own needs (263). Since her parents did not contribute much emotionally and alcohol thereby “protected [her] from growing up,” Knapp considered natural human emotion to be “beasts” that she “never learned to contend with in any other way” besides drowning them in alcohol (266). However, through seeking help with Alcoholics Anonymous, Knapp finally discovered for herself what it meant to be a human with purpose, regardless the overbearing influence from her parents, culture, or alcohol.

Knapp’s original drinking as a “search for pleasure” had gradually become a “search for the absence of pain,” depriving her of the ability and courage “to be honest...with the *self*” and eventually spurring her to reevaluate her life (272; 90; 96). Instead of facing her fears in sobriety, she learned to escape them “through drink” in order not to feel so “inadequate and small inside” and afraid of failure (280; 107). Going even to the extreme of immediately picking up her glass of wine as soon as she let go of her deceased mother’s hand, Knapp could no longer resist the urge to drink, becoming powerless to alcohol (229). Becoming passive in every aspect of her life, her perspective changed, thinking that if bad things happened, drinking merely happened to be involved, not that they happened *because* she was drinking (166). Making excuses such as “pressure, life [and] hormones,” Knapp learned to deflect the blame for decades before she finally sought her own courage to accept her failings (166).

While still a passive participant in her own life, Knapp only had a feeling that a “sense of purpose in [her] life” would simply arrive, whether it had been in the form of a perfect career or relationship to set her on the path into her future (107). Although she knew she needed purpose, she was not ready to take action right away, procrastinating and reaching for another freshly chilled bottle even when her father had encouraged her from his own deathbed to finally act (191; 221; 230). However, years later, Knapp had a moment of epiphany, realizing that she

would be “waiting for the rest of [her] life” until she was ready, so she finally took the first conflicted step of asking for help and being able to find it (Snicket; Knapp, 271).

Checking into a rehabilitation facility, Knapp learned to “stop waiting” and be “present...aware and able” in her own life (263; 259). Having been a “passive participant” for so long, she had lost her faith in her own abilities while she was corroding away her soul for the sake of her own “integrity and pride” (260; 261). The most important lesson from this aspect of Knapp’s life is the universal obstacle of passivity, marring “any hope of change,” if the individual lacks the ability to act on that will, and spawning a correlated sense of “self-loathing” (266; 261). One would be unable to find or act towards their purpose in life without being an active participant, coming to terms with the fact that “growth comes from...trying and failing and trying again,” regardless of one’s own sense of pride (263).

Knapp sought this growth through her Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, keeping things in perspective while finally teaching her “how you’re supposed to live” through the Twelve Steps, a critical lesson she never learned in her adolescence (256). Since only the first Step actually mentions alcohol, that the individuals present are “powerless” to the substance, the rest of the Steps taught Knapp that alcoholism was therefore only a part of her life and not an absolute “moral failing” (Alcoholism; Knapp 270). Then, Knapp began to take shots regularly again, except now with Alcoholics Anonymous as “daily shot[s] of hope” instead of hard liquor (256). Observing people beside her in similar situations, the Twelve Steps and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings were able to provide her with a better view of individuals learning how to “grow and change” for themselves and encouraging her to do the same (256).

Through her observance of other alcoholics, Knapp truly learned “what it means to be human,” “alive with emotion” and passing through life with a “reverent stillness,” finding genuine sources of joy in the small things in life (256; 273). Her meetings taught that they all had

blemishes, had done wrong and now needed to rebuild their characters, specifically under the Power of God (Alcoholism). With everyone in the same struggle to “restore [their] sanity,” Knapp finally found a definite source of “camaraderie and...knowledge” that she was deprived of her entire life (Alcoholism; Knapp 256).

Caroline Knapp was finally on the right track to finding her purpose in life by constantly reminding herself of “what [she is], where [she] came from, what [she needed] to do in order to change” and allowing her to regain a sense of “lightness” and “possibilities” that she never realized she had lost to alcohol (256; 273). Through her failings and falling into unhealthy relationships, she found hope and purpose through her rehabilitation. Knapp learned to appreciate the “simple presence” of those around her and admire each of their “courage and strength” for also becoming active participants in their own lives again (281). Although accompanied by a “tinge of melancholy” for the loss of their unrequited loves, Knapp purpose in life became refueled by “affection for their humanity” and the universal principle of love (281).

Although Knapp’s life was far from perfect, experiencing her own major trials and downfalls, an ultimate judgment about her life and lessons remains universally applicable. While reading this autobiography, audiences may have begun to distance themselves from her, perhaps not similarly alcoholics themselves or never having experienced comparable difficulties. However, the basis of Knapp’s humanity, the essence of struggle and redemption, is what keeps audiences engaged, enabling them to see reflections of themselves in parts of her. Depicting that life is full of challenges, anyone’s search for vocation requires additional strength to seek it out and fight for it. Potentially falling into traps, whether in the form of a dependence on an addictive substance or another person, a life well-lived can be accomplished if one can find and regain control of their life after losing it, remaining an “active participant,” as Knapp puts it, and learning from one’s mistakes while on the path towards finding and fulfilling their purpose.

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