

# MEMOIRS OF A *high-functioning* ALCOHOLIC

AS TOLD TO ROBYN MACLARTY

Writer Thando Pato has recorded her chaotic and tumultuous journey to sobriety in a gripping new memoir. She chats to FAIRLADY about life in the sober lane, and shares an excerpt from her book.



**I**N 2017, journalist Thando Pato decided to quit alcohol for one year. The decision was prompted by her brother's concern about her drinking. And quit she did, almost completing her goal. But then, shortly before the year was up, she fell off the wagon, and the experience brought her increasingly fraught and out-of-control relationship with alcohol to the fore.

In the following years, as her compulsion to drink became more erratic, she drank her way through job loss, new romance, and, perhaps most shockingly, a breast

cancer diagnosis, double mastectomy and chemotherapy.

Finally, on 30 March 2020, Thando bid booze goodbye for good. She pulls no punches in recording her struggles with generalised anxiety disorder, dead-end relationships and, of course, alcoholism – as well as her journey to self-acceptance and sobriety – in an intimate, authentic must-read memoir.

## Q&A

**Q** *When did you decide to write a book about sobriety?*

**A** I started writing it in November 2020. I've known my publisher, Melinda Ferguson, for a long time, as we've both worked in the media industry for years. We'd been talking about a book, but I didn't know what I wanted to write about. I went to a writing workshop of hers in 2018. And that's when I knew I wanted to write about my struggles with alcohol. But we both knew that in order for that to happen, I would have to get sober, and that was another two-year journey.

Then lockdown happened, and on the 30th of March I decided to get sober. I started writing the book in November that year. I wrote 500 words every day. By February 2021 I had 16,000 words, and we took it from there.

**Q** *Why was it important to you to write this book?*

**A** I wrote this book to own my shame. I couldn't believe that I had got to the point of being so out of control. The fact that I drank throughout my chemotherapy... I hated myself for that. There was a lot of self-loathing. And by writing it all down, I now own it. No one can use it against me – because *I'm* telling my story, no one else.

**Q** *Who is this book for?*

**A** When I was still in the process of giving up alcohol, I would often go to bookshops and look for books about sobriety or getting sober, and the vast majority are written by white American women. So I wrote this book to represent the perspective of a black South African woman. It tells a more complicated, nuanced story. It looks at the ideas around what a successful black woman should be. An example for me is Kerry Washington's character Olivia Pope in *The Fixer*, who is always drinking. I mean, she's an alcoholic, but because she's a beautiful woman drinking fine red wine from a beautiful glass in a beautiful setting, it's glamorised.

I also wanted to write it for those struggling with their mental health. There are so many misconceptions about anxiety and depression. People have said to me, 'You can't have anxiety; you're so confident!' Confidence has nothing

to do with it. And I wanted to address misconceptions around alcoholism. An alcoholic is not just someone who wakes up with the shakes and needs to drink immediately; there's also the high-functioning side, where you can go to work and carry on with life, yet drinking is secretly eroding your wellbeing and happiness. I wanted to show that side.

**Q** *Was it a cathartic experience, writing the book?*

**A** The first part of writing this book was great, exciting; things were coming to me, the words flowed... But then I hit more difficult parts, where I had to think about why I did what I did when I was drunk, what I was feeling or running away from. Revealing the extent of it was difficult. At one point I stopped writing for a few months. I said to my psychologist, 'I've got a block; nothing's coming to me...' But the



real reason was actually: 'Oh f\*ck.' The full picture of my addiction was coming together in front of me. And I had to process things I hadn't dealt with yet: I was finally able to acknowledge how terrified I'd been throughout my chemo experience.

**Q** *How have people close to you reacted to the book?*

**A** For my mother, reading the book was a painful experience because, she said, she hadn't known I was suffering so much, but it helped her to understand me better.

Some of my friends didn't believe me when I told them I was an alcoholic. And I think this book put things into context for them.

Thankfully, before the book was published, my therapist and I went over what kind of responses I might get. She told me, 'You are going to have people who will leave your life; there will be people who won't understand; there will be those who are in your corner and get it – and you can't take any of it personally.'

**Q** *In the book, you mention there's a difference between 'abstinence and sobriety'...*

In 2017, I stopped drinking for almost a year – I was abstaining. I had every intention of going back to alcohol, so I didn't have to really do any work on myself. Sobriety, however, is actually admitting to yourself that your relationship with alcohol is dysfunctional. When I abstained, I thought stopping drinking was all I had to do and everything would fall into place. My first year of sobriety in 2020 was hell; I felt raw and vulnerable. Sobriety made me realise I have to work on myself every single day, and go through a period of mourning. Alcohol was such a big part of my

life, through good times and bad; it was a friend (until it wasn't). And I had to mourn its loss and feel all the emotions that come with that: anger, frustration, anxiety, sadness.

**Q** *What do you like about being sober?*

**A** Having conversations with my friends and actually being able to remember them! When I drank, I had amazing conversations, but the next day they were gone. And for the first time in my life, I like myself. That self-loathing is gone.

I also discovered, in sobriety, that I am an introvert. I'd always thought I was an extrovert, but being around people drains me. That's partly why I drank, to help me socialise. Now, I love spending time in my own company; it recharges me.

**Q** *What advice would you give someone who knows they have a problem with alcohol but don't feel ready to face it?*

Get yourself a compassionate counsellor or therapist. I went to therapy while I was drinking. I'd rock up for appointments with a hangover – and my therapist rode with me through that. At no point did she scold me, judge me, or tell me I had to stop. We'd just talk about it.

You have to give yourself grace, but you also can't give yourself too long of a rope. Admitting you have a problem is the biggest hurdle. Thereafter, you have to understand that it's a process. One study found it can take up to nine years from realising you have a problem to the point where you stop for good.

It's important to be realistic. You might lose people, and life still has its problems – it's just that you're sober now.

Excerpt from  
*On the Rocks*

I don't drink for the entire first cycle of my chemotherapy. The two weeks pass by quickly and uneventfully, with none of the dreaded side-effects I have been anticipating. On the third week, I crave a glass of wine. I wrestle with myself. I give myself a pep talk. 'It's only for six months. You stopped drinking for a whole year! Come on now,' I shout at myself in my head.

I don't tell Ingrid about what happened at the meeting that I didn't attend. I have seen less of Ingrid this year. She calls me out on it when I cancel our appointment. At some point you are going to have to process everything. I am here for you when you are ready, she texts.

I am not ready; I feel like I have been making life-changing decision after life-changing decision and I am exhausted. I just don't have the emotional bandwidth to deal with everything that is happening to me and, on top of that, I must quit drinking!

I go back to the cancer-support chat group. I ask: Has anyone had a drink while doing chemo?

There is silence for about an hour. I feel awful for having asked the question. Who does that? It's cancer – who would want to drink during cancer?

Then Dan61 responds: I have sneaked in a few drinks here and there. No side-effects so far. How long is your chemo for?

Lisa1987: Yeah, I have had a few drinks but nothing like I did before chemo though. I don't want to fuck up my liver.

SusieT556: What does your doctor say? I don't think it's safe. Can't you hold off until chemo is done?

The last message lands like a punch straight to my solar plexus. Why can't I just wait? I haven't spoken to Dr D about my drinking during chemotherapy. Common sense says I shouldn't. But, as I sit there, I have a niggling urge to have just one drink. Surely there will be no harm with one glass? I spend the day wrestling with myself and my urge to drink. The urge wins.

I decide not to drink at home, but rather to go out, so I can restrict myself to just one glass.

I decide to go for dinner. Tasha's at Hyde Park Corner. I have no problem eating alone at a restaurant. I rather enjoy it. I sit and watch the people around me, listen in on the conversations and imagine their lives beyond the setting I am seeing them in.

I procrastinate about going straight to the restaurant, so I start at Exclusive Books, where I browse for about 30 minutes.

My stomach growls with hunger. I make the short walk to Tasha's, which is on the same floor, and sit at a table for two. A waiter appears with a menu the minute I am seated. I know what I am going to drink and eat, but I take the menus anyway and ask him to bring me a small bottle of sparkling water in the meantime.

I check my phone for messages. Nothing. I go to the cancer support group and check if there have been any more messages.

The chat is filled with them. The conversation has turned nasty and there are two camps: the drinkers versus the non-drinkers.

The drinkers understand my craving and are urging me to drink with caution, while the non-drinkers are calling out my irresponsible behaviour.

I feel guilty, but I know that I have made up my mind. Just one drink.

The waiter brings my water and asks if I need more time. I shake my head.

I order a glass of Pinot Noir and lamb chops with a salad.

At the table next to me is a family of four having an argument. I pretend to be busy on my phone, but I listen into their conversation. My wine arrives, an enormous glass, almost like a mini cereal bowl. It is

filled to half and the gentle aroma of berries wafts over me. My mouth salivates in anticipation of the first sip. I drink my water instead. I am still listening to the rising voices of the people at the table.

I look at the colour of the wine. I am always fascinated by the soft red of a Pinot Noir compared to that of a normal red.

I can't wait any longer, so I take a sip. The smell of soft berries travels to my nose while the dry taste of the wine hits my palate. I close my eyes and swallow. I am satisfied. I am glad I came here.

I needed this. I take another small sip and put down my glass. I am only having one glass, so I need to savour it. I lean back in my chair and look around, my concentration drifting from the people next to me as I scan the room and my surroundings. I haven't been out much since I started chemo; I have been avoiding people just to avoid the temptation to drink. The only person I have seen regularly is the Smile-Maker and that is during the week; over the last two weekends he's been busy so I have been left to my own devices.

Today is a welcome respite from my self-imposed solitude.

On cue, my hot flushes start, and I take off my coat. The heat travels to my face and head, and I have the urge to yank off my wig, which only seems to be making things worse. I use a serviette to dab the sweat off my face. I take a large gulp of water for some relief. The flush lingers for about 5 minutes. I dab the film of sweat that keeps forming on my face.

My food arrives and I am suddenly overwhelmed. I want to ask for a takeaway, but that will mean I am drinking on an empty stomach, so instead I sit back and patiently wait for my body to readjust.

Eventually I eat, but I don't really take in the flavours of what I am eating. My palate is thirsty for the Pinot Noir, which is almost finished. This must be the slowest I have ever drunk a glass of wine. I drink it over 45 minutes, careful not to take big sips.

When it's finished, I stare at the glass and sigh.

'Another glass?' asks the waiter, appearing out of nowhere.

I automatically nod my head.

Immediately I start admonishing myself. But I am not going to change my mind.

After two glasses, I pay the bill and call my Uber. My mindset is divided; part of me is happy that I drank, the other deeply ashamed.

Of course, after those two glasses, I drink more often during chemotherapy. I choose to drink on the two weeks I am off the treatment. That becomes my pattern. A few weeks after the two glasses, I meet up with my friend Naomi in Parkhurst.

We share a bottle of sparkling wine with breakfast at Espresso. We talk about life and relationships. She tells me about work. When breakfast and the bottle are done, we head across the street to Bottega and I spontaneously order a bottle of Champagne. 'Let's celebrate life. It's on me,' I tell her. Before I know it, one bottle becomes two. The waitress refers to us as 'The Champagne Darlings!'

I don't know what time we leave or how I get home, but I do get home because I wake up a few hours later in my bed. My throat is dry, and my head is pounding. The room is dark.

The curtains are still open and it's black outside. Oh God, I got plastered. ❖

