

One Glass is Never Enough

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Extract

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One Glass Is Not Enough

Jane Wenham-Jones

1. Bollinger Special Cuvee

A fine Champagne. Fresh and vigorous, bursting with possibility.

Welcome to *Greens*. Kiss. Welcome to *Greens*.

How lovely to see you. Kiss. Welcome to *Greens*.

Welcome to *Greens*. Kiss. Now under sparkling new management. Kiss. (Whoops – don't know her.)

Please help yourself to a complimentary glass of Fleur de Lys – our specially-selected house wine in red or white. Kiss, Kiss. (Mmmn. Ooh yes...) Welcome to *Greens*. (Oh. That must be his wife glaring.)

Do come in. Kiss. A warm welcome to *Greens*. Kent's Premier wine bar and...

"A bottomless money-pit run by three mad women who don't know what they're doing..." Victor pushed his way to Gaynor's side, holding a glass of champagne high in front of him so as not to spill it. He hadn't brought her one. She grimaced. A supportive husband was such a boon in business.

"Good evening!" Gaynor fixed a blonde just coming through the door with her biggest smile. "Welcome to *Greens*." She gave Victor a sharp nudge with her elbow. "Could you take over for a moment, darling? Just got to pop to the loo..."

Let him chat her up. Gaynor needed more alcohol. So far, she'd ushered in what felt like five hundred people – all on a quick snort of Bolly and the one tiny glass of Chablis she'd managed to grab when Sarah, her new business partner, wasn't looking.

"You're not allowed to get pissed till later", Sarah had said. (For someone about to open a wine bar, she could be very boring about drinking) "You're Meeting and Greeting! Your job's to look lovely and make them feel wanted."

Hmm. Gaynor could have done with a bit of that herself. She stepped sideways to let more people through, looking at the back of Victor's glossy brown head as he moved forward to shake hands with a tall bloke in a suit. She sighed. She'd been so looking forward to this and she should have been feeling marvellous. Instead, this odd feeling kept welling up inside her, making her want to rush away and hide somewhere, before bursting into tears.

Usually she loved parties and they'd worked so hard for tonight, she and Sarah and Claire. Six weeks ago, when they'd bought it, the place had been run-down and filthy with only three old drunks propping up the bar and locals giving it a wide berth.

It had been hard to imagine then, that it could look like this, but Claire, her other partner, was a woman with a vision. And with military precision, an army of builders and a frighteningly long list of Jobs-to-be-Done, she'd led them firmly through the battle of recreating it.

Now *Greens* had reopened in all its freshly-stripped floor boards and newly-painted glory. The bold Mediterranean oils – sun-drenched squares of bright yellows and blues against the white walls – set off the huge terracotta pots, the dark beams, the delicate fronds of the deep green palms.

Beneath the varnished oak canopy above the bar, rows of sparkly wine glasses twinkled in the spotlights. Gaynor listened to the chink of many more amongst the buzz of voices and laughter from the clusters of beautiful people jostling for every square foot of space. The faint strains of the high, sweet voice of Norah Jones came through the speakers, almost drowned out by the hum of chatter below. The place was heaving. They'd known they'd be busy – but nobody had expected this.

They were six deep at the bar. Gaynor could see Sarah and Jack's heads bobbing about as they moved rapidly to and fro serving. She started to wriggle through the hot crush of bodies so she could squeeze in there too and get to the fridge.

Every few seconds someone stopped her.

"What a transformation!"

"Gosh, I didn't recognise the place."

"Fabulous wine list, darling – did it take ages to choose?"

It had taken several near-terminal hangovers. Claire had been in touch with every wine supplier in the country it seemed and the cases of samples had reached the ceiling. One night they'd tasted so many mid-range Cabernet Sauvignons Gaynor couldn't say it, let alone pick one.

"Lovely place you've got here!" Someone grabbed her arm. "And what we want to know is ..." It was a dark-haired woman with mad eyes and an alarming amount of eyeliner, "are you going to do Sushi?"

"Not sure about that," Gaynor slid her wrist from the woman's grasp and edged away. God knows who she was. *Sushi?*

Claire and Sarah had spent hours poring over recipe books, discussing the menu but she didn't remember much raw fish appearing on it. Claire was for free-range, organic, 'kindly-killed' meat. Gaynor had snorted at the incongruity but Claire, a fierce vegetarian, had been serious. "People will expect steaks," she'd said regretfully, but we can at least choose where we get them from. Sarah talked of beautifully-simple pasta dishes, colourful salads and delicious soups – everything made from scratch. Gaynor looked up at the blackboard where she'd earlier written up a list of sample dishes, in coloured chalks. She'd felt so excited. Wow, she'd thought, hugging herself inside, as she carefully drew the outline of a long-stemmed wine glass in green, *I own part of this...* She looked back at Victor on the door. If only she felt she could share it...

As she pushed her way through to the bar, she felt two hands close over her buttocks. She squealed and swung round. Local stud, Danny, was grinning. "Hello Gorgeous – phroor – you look horny in that dress." Someone shoved past behind her and she was pushed up against him. He pulled her closer.

Gaynor's heart sank. Danny was tall and good-looking with curly blond-brown hair, shiny hazelnut eyes and very white teeth. Much fancied and with more notches on his bedpost than *Greens* had wineglasses. He was the last person she wanted to see. She glared at his sun-tanned features and dazzling orange and green designer shirt. "For God's sake!" She glanced anxiously towards the front door. "Victor's over there."

"It's OK – he's not looking. He can't see my hands anyway." He raised his voice to be heard over the noise and Gaynor squirmed away from him, frowning. "No, but everyone else can."

She could only move a few inches without pushing hard into the people behind her. She began to slide sideways. He caught hold of her again and put his mouth against her ear. "I want you."

"Charmed I'm sure," she said, twisting her head, trying to see if Victor was still occupied.

Danny was still pressed close. "When am I going to see you? It's been weeks since..."

"I've been busy with this place – took ages to get ready. Painting, cleaning. We had to..."

"Well it's done now. Thought the other two were going to run it."

"They are, but I have to help too. I'm going to be hands-on sometimes."

"I want to be hands on all the time..." His fingers were sliding up the hem of her dress.

"Danny! The place is full of people I know."

"But they aren't looking. Remember when we..."

"Get off!"

She dived between two waiting customers and through the gap in the bar, nearly colliding with her Claire, who was coming through with a tray. She stepped back again.

"I'm bringing up more meatballs," Claire cried, as Danny pushed his crotch against Gaynor's thigh. "This is fantastic. If all these people just come in once a week each..."

"Yeah, great." Gaynor wanted her wine. She scowled at Danny and slid round behind Jack, their young and enthusiastic barman. He pulled a champagne cork with an expert flourish and turned and grinned at her.

"Hello, sweet-pea."

"I need a drink."

"You're the boss." He put the heavy bottle of Bollinger in an ice bucket and reached up for two flutes from the shelf above. "What shall I get you?"

Sarah swung round. Her pale skin, against her shock of red hair, looked whiter than ever.

"We're rushed off our feet here," she hissed. "Can't you do something useful instead? I need to go and check on the children. Mum's supposed to be in charge – better make sure they haven't trussed her up or anything. There's been some very funny noises coming through the ceiling."

She shovelled ice into two tumblers as Gaynor laughed affectionately. "Come off it! You can't hear a thing down here with this lot."

Jack draped an arm around Sarah's shoulders on his way to the till. "Everyone's entitled to a little paranoia." He gave her a squeeze. "But I'm OK here if you want to go up."

Sarah made a face. "In a minute. There's people waiting to be served," she said briskly, turning a corkscrew deep into a bottle of burgundy. "Gaynor, can you go and collect some glasses?"

"Yep, sure." Gaynor opened the fridge and grabbed at the Chablis bottle she'd opened earlier. There was about an inch left in it. Damn. Sarah would notice if she stood around opening another one. She hesitated then emptied it into the largest glass she could find and quickly topped up with house dry before Sarah turned round.

"You OK?" she asked her old friend and now fellow wine-bar-owner.

Sarah gave a sudden smile. "I think so. Just about."

It had been a mad few weeks for all of them with painters and electricians and plumbers and tilers and floor-sanders and god knows who crawling about the place. Not to mention Claire, their other partner, having them on 24 hour squad duty on the cleaning front, during which, Gaynor had even been forced to don the marigolds herself (yuck). But for Sarah, a newly-single mother with three kids to look after, a house move to the flat upstairs *and* all the ex-marital stuff to deal with... No wonder she looked permanently exhausted.

But she'd scrubbed up well tonight. You wouldn't know she'd scurried upstairs to get ready just before the doors opened. She'd lost weight in the last couple of months and the dark red, silk shift suited her. She'd slapped on enough concealer beneath her huge green eyes to cover up the dark circles unless you got very close.

"You look great," Gaynor smoothed her hands over the hips of her own little glittery black dress. There'd been a point when she'd thought they'd all be opening up in filthy jeans and paint in their hair. It was five o'clock before the electrician solved the mystery of why the cellar was plunged into darkness every time someone opened the upstairs fridge and the plumber finally departed (swearing on his grandmother's grave that he'd be back if the leaks continued to spring eternal).

The ice machine was still balanced precariously on a beer crate and the glass washer refused to work for anyone. But they were open. Gaynor had finished arranging the flowers mere minutes before seven and Sarah, Claire and Benjamin – a young trainee chef hastily recruited from the local catering college – had finished the food seconds later. There'd been little time to savour the moment – a quick mouthful of champagne and they'd flung open the doors. The first customers were already on the pavement.

Sarah turned to serve someone. "We got there in the end, eh?" she said, over her shoulder.

"Do you have any English wine?" The speaker was fifty-five and bore a striking resemblance to Ann Widdecombe. She was looking straight at Gaynor.

"We tried a rather nice one in a little vineyard near Canterbury" her tweedie husband interjected helpfully.

Gaynor shuddered. "I'm not actually serving," she said, squeezing back out into the melee. "Our lovely bar-hand Jack will be with you shortly..."

Victor seemed happy enough on the door. Gaynor found space for a moment by the open brick fireplace, balancing her glass on the thick beam of mantelpiece. She saw a neighbour waving at her and waved back. She should be circulating. She was supposed to sparkle. That's what she was good at. "It'll be right up your street," Sarah had laughed. "Kissing all and sundry..."

But it was hot and noisy and her heart wasn't in it.

She could feel the wine zinging its way around her bloodstream – there'd been no time to eat since breakfast – and she longed to curl up in a corner.

A group of twenty-somethings laughed loudly next to her. She pressed her fingers against her ears and then released them. In and out, in and out, as she'd done as a child, hearing the roar of voices swell and recede in dizzying waves.

Her step-daughter Chloe appeared, in a cropped white T-shirt and low-slung raspberry silk combat pants.

"What are you doing?"

She looked fantastic. Chloe was beautiful. She had an almost oriental look with her almond eyes, pale face and dark lips. Gaynor had been mesmerised by her creamy teenage skin when she'd first met her – not believing that anyone could have cheeks so pore-less, so smooth they looked airbrushed. And at twenty-seven her complexion was still perfect. She was tall like her father, with Victor's strong chin and confident movements. She commanded attention like he did. People turned their heads to look at Chloe – she had a style and elegance that was all her own.

"Nothing. You look lovely." Gaynor said, looking into Chloe's glass at a deep pink liquid that matched her pants. "Cranberry? Bet you've got a large vodka sneaked in there."

"No, I haven't."

"Well you should have."

Chloe put her arm through Gaynor's. "It's so fab. Shame Ollie had a bloody client."

Gaynor smiled. Not to her it wasn't. There was nothing really wrong with Oliver but since he and Chloe had moved in together things weren't quite the same. Gaynor loved Chloe. But loved her on her own. She liked staying up late with her after Victor had gone to bed. To drink wine, talk about clothes and shoes and hair and – sometimes – why Victor could be such a funny bastard.

Chloe would tell of the parties she'd been to and who was bedding who in the TV company where she worked. They'd paint each other's nails, do each other's hair, meet for lunch or cocktails when Gaynor went to town.

In Harvey Nichols – the two of them scooping up lipsticks – the decade between them disappeared. Gaynor smiled inside when she thought of Chloe holding up the latest eye-lift wonder-gel. "Dad's credit card?" she'd asked mischievously. The Saleswoman had thought they were sisters!

"Why's Dad grumpy?" Chloe nodded towards the door.

"Probably because I've left him there and he's got to be nice to people."

Chloe frowned. Gaynor knew what she was thinking. Why should that be a problem? Victor had made a whole career out of being nice. He was Mr Smooth, Mr Charisma. Saying the right thing to a few over-dressed middle-aged blondes was right up his street.

Gaynor glanced over to where Victor was shaking hands at the door. In his dark suit, he looked every inch the successful executive he was. Tall, self-assured, clean-cut. With his charming, almost apologetic smile, the bit of hair that curled across his forehead, the even, slightly boyish features, he could always endear himself to women. They watched him stoop to kiss a small brunette in a red dress. For a mad moment Gaynor thought about telling Chloe. Once she might have done. Once, when they saw each other a lot, when they used to giggle together behind Victor's back, when they sometimes really did feel like sisters.

Until Chloe met Oliver. And something changed.

Chloe was gesturing around her. "You've made it lovely. What's this Claire like? Will you all get on?"

Gaynor took a mouthful of wine. "I think so. Anyway I'm not involved in the day to day..."

They'd worked it all out. Gaynor would put up a third of the cash and be a sleeping partner. "I'll come down and circulate," she'd said – seeing herself perched at the bar, champagne glass in hand – "and Victor and I will get all our friends down, but I can't do things in the kitchen or anything."

Sarah had laughed. "No, I wasn't visualising you doing the washing up, don't worry..."

"Claire's very efficient," Gaynor said now, remembering the spreadsheets and the PowerPoint presentation she'd prepared for the bank, the decisive way she'd dealt with the solicitor and the accountant. And a little scary, she added silently to herself. "She's got all sorts of systems worked out. We're going to..."

"Oh well, that's good," Chloe had lost interest already. "I've got tomorrow off, did Dad tell you? I thought we could have lunch and stuff – catch up properly." She gave a sideways smile. "I might even stay another night. I've got so much to tell you."

Gaynor made herself look pleased. The further achievements of Oliver the Oracle no doubt. But her heart sank. Victor was home tomorrow and she'd wanted to talk to *him*. If Chloe stayed it would be yet another chance for him to avoid her, another lost opportunity to confront him about what she'd found...

She switched on her bright voice. "No, he didn't. I've hardly seen him." *And he barely speaks to me these days anyway.* "But that's great, great. That'll be fun."

She'd have to do it when Chloe had gone to bed. She glanced across the room. Victor had disappeared. She took another mouthful of wine and then a deep breath. "I'll have to go back on the door..."

"Who's your friend?" Danny blocked her path.

"My step-daughter."

"Hi," Chloe looked at him coolly.

"Catch you later," Gaynor shot a warning look at Danny and made her way back to the entrance. She hoped he wasn't going to make trouble. Things were complicated enough as it was.

And her glass was empty again. Gaynor sighed.

Welcome to *Greens*, kiss. Welcome to *Greens*...

"Well," said a spiky blonde to Sarah at the bar. "I see our Gaynor's not worried about Mutton and Lamb then..."

Sarah looked from her to Gaynor on the door. "She looks wonderful, doesn't she? Wish I had her body."

The blonde examined her nails. "Well she's got nothing to do but go to the gym all day. We could all be like that if we didn't have to work."

Sarah lifted a tray of glasses. "You a friend of hers, are you?" she asked sweetly. "Gaynor's done a lot to get this place up and running."

True, most of it had been on the phone to the fabric department of John Lewis, she thought, but she wasn't going to have this old shrew running her new business partner down. "Excuse me."

She dodged behind Jack and turned to serve the next couple waiting. Gaynor might not be too hot on the practical stuff but she was perfect at this sort of thing – air-kissing everyone, greeting each new guest as if they were the most important of the evening.

Sarah smiled as she watched Gaynor thrust her chest out a fraction as two blokes walked in on their own. She wondered if she knew she did it. One of them kissed her on the mouth, his hand lingering for several seconds on her bare back. Gaynor smiled up into his eyes. Sarah shook her head. If only they'd flock round her so easily.

She thought of her mother's words earlier. "You won't find it so easy now, you know. At your age everyone's paired off." Her mother had sighed. "When I think of that lovely house..."

That lovely house with the repossession order on it. With the unpaid bills piling up on the window-sills, with the detached garage housing the car with the overdue HP payments. That house...

"And you nearly forty..."

Sarah was thirty-seven. Though first thing that morning, she could have passed for ten years more no problem, she thought ruefully.

“Bottle of Bud, please Darlin’” The young man the other side of the bar could probably have been her son. If she’d got pregnant at fourteen like half the other girls at school he could be her grandson. Well, not quite. But he could have given her a grandson by now. If not two.

Over at the door, Gaynor turned and caught Sarah’s eye – her eyebrows raised suggestively. Sarah shook her head.

“Do you want a glass for that?” she asked the boy.

He shook his head, and put the neck of the bottle to his mouth.

Sarah gave a small smile. Why wasn’t she surprised.

* * *

It was late and nobody new was likely to arrive now. Gaynor headed back to the Chablis. Sarah was polishing glasses, talking to Seb, a friend of Claire’s naughty brother Neill. With their tight T-shirts and bleached-out jeans, they both looked more like pop-stars than city bankers. Sarah had her school-teacher face on. “I’m much too old for you – I’ve got three children.”

He laughed. “I wasn’t thinking of marriage, I was thinking of giving you one.”

Sarah rolled her eyes but she also flushed. Gaynor moved round behind the bar and gave her a small prod. Sarah brought her foot up and poked Gaynor back with the toe of her shoe.

“How very kind of you,” she said dryly to Seb. “I’ll bear it in mind if I don’t get any better offers tonight.”

“Oh yessss,” Gaynor said, looking at Seb’s behind as he wandered off in search of more willing prey. “Just what you need – a nice, firm young body...”

“A toy-boy?”

“I wouldn’t say no.”

“You never do.”

Gaynor jabbed at her with a long nail. “That’s not a very nice thing to say now is it? I thought you and Jack were going to get it together.”

“Don’t be silly – we’re just mates. Though I think he might have got a bit of a crush on me actually. We were having a little banter earlier and he got quite – you know.” Sarah laughed self-consciously. “I think he’d quite like to take me to bed.”

“Well of course he would. Bloody hell he’s nineteen – he’s going to be gagging for it the whole time.”

“Yeah but I he’s a bit frightened of us.”

“Rubbish. Go and give him one – he’d be terribly grateful.”

Sarah shook her head. “I’d be grateful – it’s been that long.”

“You didn’t get anywhere with...?”

“He’s not interested...”

They both turned and surveyed Richard who was sitting on a bar stool looking pained. Gaynor could see he was a good-looking bloke in a quiet civil-servant, might-still-live-with-his-mum sort of way (if you liked that sort of thing, which Gaynor didn’t) but she couldn’t understand why Sarah viewed him with such longing. He’d clearly had a personality bypass early on in life and it was no surprise to her he’d never been married. But Sarah insisted he wasn’t gay, that he lived on his own in quite a big house, earned mega bucks in some important job at Pfizer the pharmaceutical company ten miles away and that lots of women would fall over themselves to get him to bed.

Hmm. As far as Gaynor was concerned, he should think himself jolly lucky someone like Sarah would look at him twice and he should have been falling over *himself* to woo *her*! So far, however, Sarah reported sorrowfully, he barely appeared to have noticed.

“Hmmm,” said Gaynor out loud, weighing up the options and making a snap decision. “Jack AND Seb – shag both of them.”

Sarah laughed. “I’m not you!”

The last of the stragglers had gone and they were sitting in the courtyard. Tea-lights and lanterns flickered among the hanging baskets and tubs, throwing soft shadows up the whitewashed walls and over the trails of greenery. In the fairytale light, the pansies and geraniums had lost their sharp crimsons and purples and looked dark and velvety. It was after one but the air was still warm and sultry. Or perhaps she was just full of alcohol. Gaynor breathed in the scent of the sweet, heady jasmine that climbed among the ivy and surveyed the various bottles and glasses littering the wooden tables. She looked around at the faces in the candlelight and felt a surge of pride and pleasure.

“Isn’t this lovely?” she said, waving an arm around her. “Isn’t it all wonderful?” She was slurring slightly and Victor frowned at her but who cared. This was the first successful night of their exciting new venture and why shouldn’t she celebrate. She took a large swallow of Pinot Grigio – it was the fourth different wine she’d had this evening but it seemed easier to just drink what was open – and raised her glass to the others. “To us!”

“To us!” Claire leaning back in her chair with Jamie, her partner, perched on the arm of it, raised her own drink. “It went so well, didn’t it?”

Jamie squeezed her shoulder. "After all that!" he said.

Neill, sitting on the paving slabs, his back against the wall, sucked on a large joint before handing it across to Seb.

"Yeah, you really had your knickers in a twist earlier didn't you, Sis?"

Claire pulled a face at him. "I just never thought we'd be ready on time."

Sarah laughed. "When that water started dripping through the bloody ceiling..."

Claire poured another glass of wine. "He's coming back tomorrow – the so-called Plumber – and I'm not letting him out of here until he's checked every pipe in the place. And there's still the hanging sign..."

She pulled a notepad towards her, suddenly frowning. "There's a hell of a lot to do. It's going to have to be all hands to the pump during the day while we're closed until this is all sorted." She looked at Gaynor. "You're around tomorrow aren't you? There's still some cleaning..."

"I thought we were going to court for the full licence..."

"You don't need to come – it's only me and Sarah."

"I want to support you both."

"It's only a formality. We've got the protection order and nobody's going to object to us now. So who cares if we sell a few spirits too?" She nodded at the tumbler in Victor's hand. "People like to have a choice. But," she looked back at Gaynor. "Someone needs to be here when the deliveries come..."

"Chill, sis," Neill shook back his floppy brown hair, blew out a long stream of smoke and closed his eyes. "I'll do it. You don't want to give yourself high blood pressure now. You've only been open a day." Claire screwed her mouth into a sarcastic pout and wrote something more on the list. "No danger of that," she said tightly.

Neill gave a languid smile. Victor, glancing at Gaynor over the top of his scotch glass, raised his eyebrows in an infuriating gesture that said "Oh dear? Trouble already?" She ignored him.

"So how's life with you, Chloe?" Sarah spoke brightly.

Chloe looked across at Victor and giggled, putting her hand over her mouth, uncharacteristically girly. Then her eyes flicked to Gaynor's. "I was going to tell you both tomorrow," she said.

Gaynor swallowed the last of her wine and poured another one. As if they couldn't guess. Ever since Chloe met Oliver and her idea of a thrilling conversation had moved from Crème de Mer and Manolos to Pensions and Quality of Life, she'd known it was only a matter of time.

"What's that, my darling?" Victor was smiling indulgently at his daughter.

"Oh I don't know. Ollie should be here really..."

Gaynor cringed inside. What, to go down on one knee in front of them all? Only Chloe would upstage their opening night by announcing her engagement right now. This was supposed to be a celebration. A toast to the opening of *Greens* and their brave enterprise. Now they'd have to gush over her and Oliver – probably look at the wedding dress samples and swatches for the colour scheme Chloe would whip from her handbag right there and then.

"Oh go on," Sarah was smiling at Chloe encouragingly. Chloe lowered her eyes for a moment. In the candlelight, her oval face looked exotic and feline. It held an odd mixture of self-conscious shyness and smug pride. She sipped at her drink for a moment before answering.

And as Gaynor looked at the juice in her step-daughter's hand it all fell into place. Her stomach flipped coldly and the walls seemed to roll downwards in the most nauseating fashion.

Now there was real triumph in Chloe's eyes as she opened her mouth. For a moment Gaynor wanted to lunge at her, clap a hand across those wine-coloured lips to stop her saying it.

"I'm pregnant."

NO.

"Ooooooh." Their chorus of approval roared in Gaynor's ears.

"Champagne!" Victor was standing up, taking his daughter in his arms.

The room shifted and blurred. Gaynor stood up too. Thinking she could do it. Could move quickly, speak brightly, add her noises of pleasure. But as she opened her mouth and tried to summon the words, something else welled up inside her in a sickening swirl of nausea and pain. Panic-struck she stumbled across the courtyard and into the corridor, hearing Sarah's voice exclaiming in delight behind her, as bitter hurt and disappointment rose in her own throat. She just made it to the loo before she threw up.