

MY WHINE, YOUR WINE

Shannon Marie Abbott, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Ann McCutchan, Major Professor
Bonnie Friedman, Committee Member
Barbara Rodman, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of
English
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the
Toulouse Graduate School

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Grapes hold the flavors of the lands where they grow, and when you make wine from them, those flavors of the land come through. Tasting wine from a place you've been can bring you back to that place with aromas and notes indicative of that place. A bottle of wine changes every day, and how it will taste depends on the moment you choose to release it from the glass walls. I have a vested interest in wine, because it is a living thing. I am compelled to make wine because its characteristics are like personality traits. Although some of those characteristics are harsh at times, I appreciate them all. Each trait plays an important role in the balance, the overall personality. Like my own personality flaws, wine's harsh tones can smooth over time. My relationship with wine is constantly evolving, with every new varietal, vintage, batch and blend. Believe me, after some of the jobs I had before my first day at Su Vino, I cherish every moment of my winemaking career. *My Whine, Your Wine* is the story of how it all started.

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By

Shannon Marie Abbott

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PART I

WORKING WORLD NARRATIVES: CULTIVATING THE STORY FROM THE
EVERYDAY

When I walked into Su Vino winery for the first time, I didn't expect to get a job as a winemaker. Little did I know, the biggest challenges I encountered would have little to do with the procedures and responsibilities the job required. As I wrote about my experiences there, all of my personal flaws were illuminated. What began as a description of how wine is made slowly turned into personal essay once I started to embrace the idea of full disclosure, or getting the ugly out, as I like to call it. When I began writing about the people at the winery, and my relationships with them, the story took shape.

Finding a compelling story in the everyday is the juiciness of life required to write about it. It is what other people find intriguing and entertaining. Americans spend quite a lot of time at work, compared to other cultures I have admired in life and literature. Some only work for a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the evening, with a significant break in the middle for a large meal and a nap. Vivian Gornick would say our places of business make up the situation, but the story which can emerge from the situation is the meat and potatoes, the main course. When I became a winemaker, I felt like a member of very exclusive club, but then I worried I was in a heap of trouble, because I had no idea how to make wine.

As I became more accustomed to it, learning voraciously along the way, I decided the job itself was less than half the battle. The struggle came in dealing with my coworkers, and with the industry's general attitude about me: a young woman without a formal education in the field, proclaiming herself head winemaker. I struggled with my own self-confidence, and whether or not I could ever become a serious and well-respected winemaker. I was either going to fall flat on my face and leave the industry with my tail between my legs, or I was going to be the best.

Writing about work has taken on various structures and forms, from Studs Terkel's interview style in *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About*

What They Do to Anthony Bourdain's raw honesty about his experiences in the restaurant industry in *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*. Barbara Ehrenreich went to work in three states, specifically to write about her experiences while attempting to live on minimum wage, for her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*. In contrast, when I became a winemaker, I had no idea *My Whine, Your Wine* would come from the experience. When I quickly realized my social shortcomings were going to show themselves regardless of the wonderful occupation I'd landed, documenting the story presented itself as an opportunity to learn some important things about myself.

Structure and style are like a nicely aged Merlot, as opposed to the mashed grapes it came from. These elements put experiences and creative ideas into a legible, understandable and relatable format, and they can make or break the manuscript. Had Bourdain forgone essays for a how-to format, we would have missed his passion for cooking, as well as the sweat and blood he put into it. We might have the benefit of some great, new recipes, but we wouldn't know that the mob was behind nearly every restaurant in New York, even into the 80's and 90's, or how Bourdain dealt with that situation.

Similarly, *My Whine, Your Wine* could easily have been an instructional manual about how to make wine, but the story never would have emerged. If Ehrenreich hadn't made the decision to go undercover instead of just interviewing people who already worked for minimum wage, why would it be important? We care about her character because we can identify with her. After all, Studs Terkel already did the interview thing, so well it would be hard to top him. If Terkel had put his interview-style material into his own words, it wouldn't have been as powerful. The reader might have felt cheated out of the true voices of the people who shared those experiences

of working, instead finding a semi-informed voice telling us what it is like to be a farmer or a prostitute.

What the aforementioned works have in common is they all take a good, hard look at what becomes involved when you go to work, a ritual far more than completing a set of tasks and going home. It is, "above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us" (Terkel xi). Indeed, no matter where one goes each day during the block of time reserved for working, obstacles and relationships stand in the way of a mundane existence. What would we do without all of the fantastic drama we scoff at, but are all secretly grateful to have? Without it, boredom would surely kill the lot of us with one, dream-killing gnash of its all-too-predictable teeth.

Beautiful descriptions of people and places are what signal to the reader Terkel's abilities as a writer. He sets up the scene where this interview takes place with a style reminiscent of a play write:

A worked-out mining town in eastern Kentucky, Blackey. It is near the Virginia border. The Cumberlands are in view; is it fog, smoke, or a heavy dust that causes them to appear more distant than they really are? The people of the town, population 350- the young have gone- are, many of them, of Revolutionary War stock. Most are on welfare.

(Terkel 14)

After reading this introduction, we are transported to this place, almost tasting the dusty air in Blackey or visualizing a walk down the street in a place with only 350 residents. As wonderful as Terkel's additions were, one question bounced around in my mind. Can he call it his if he merely transcribed conversations? Terkel's artistic involvement is not only evident in the preludes to certain interviews, but in the way he conducted those interviews. A tremendous amount of

valuable and interesting information is available, no matter who is being interviewed, when the interviewer knows which questions to ask. Studs Terkel always had a set of questions and an agenda when he spoke with the people in *Working*.

Terkel was able to get people to open up about what they do for a living because he took a considerable amount of care in formulating his questions beforehand. He kept the questions open-ended and direct, and he made sure they were worded to bring out the answers he desired from those people whose stories appear on the pages. He simply asked cleaning lady, Maggie Holmes, "Do you call her by her last name?" when referring to her boss (115). Maggie's short response is loaded with information about how she really felt about what went on at work, and we get to see what she did to mask those feelings daily. "Most time I don't call her, period. I don't say anything to her. I don't talk nasty to nobody, but when I go to work I don't talk to people. Most time they don't like what you're gonna say. So I keeps quiet" (115). Without knowing anything else about the interview, we can tell Maggie didn't appreciate the way her boss treated her. With the, "if you can't say something nice..." approach she took, Maggie remained professional. Most people have to bite their tongues at work, at some point or another. We also know that she was human and, like the rest of us, probably needed to vent her frustrations off the clock. Terkel knew his readers would identify with a woman like Maggie, whether they were black, brown or white, and whether they laid concrete, taught school or managed stock portfolios for a living. The art is in his ability to bring to the surface of those interviews the personality traits that would create a bond between his characters and the reader.

No doubt, he posed the same question to Sam the barber, who also spoke with Terkel about how to address people at work. Again, the topic produced a healthy chunk of information, not only about Sam's work ethic, but about what a name means. "Customers call me by my first

name- Sam. I have customers twenty years old that call me Sam. I call the customer Mister. I never jump to callin' a man by his first name unless a man tells me himself, "Why don't you call me Joe?" Otherwise I call him Mister" (235). Sam is from the school that teaches respect for elders, but he puts up with young men calling him by his first name at work (even though you can tell, just by his mention of it, he thinks it is rude), and he appreciates the gesture when someone offers their first name, a leveling of the playing field.

Harvey Pekar took Terkel's *Working* and produced a graphic adaptation of the key interviews Terkel conducted back in the 70's. Pekar was true to Terkel's impressive editing techniques, but boiled the interviews down even further, to the key phrases, the essence of the conversation. In a way, Pekar beat Terkel at his own game. Most of the story is in the illustrations in Pekar's adaptation, so the words he does pull out of Terkel's interviews are selected carefully. Along with his illustrations, he was able to show us the entire conversation with only 8 or 10 lines of text. I try to keep my sentences as condensed as I can for maximum impact, and I spent many hours boiling down the material for *My Whine, Your Wine*, but what is important is creating a picture of what is happening. Pekar's illustrations are more useful in telling Terkel's story than the phrases he chooses to caption them with, anyway.

Terkel's 9-page interview with prostitute Roberta Victor was a page-turner with no obvious need for editing. However, in reading Pekar's adaptation of it, I saw that Roberta Victor's story was filled with comedic anecdotes... masking something. She had become an expert in talking about what she did and had years to think up juicy rationalizations and one-liners to make people feel okay about prostitution. This is where the story is. With her hesitation to fully embrace what she is doing for a living, there comes an underlying reason for wanting to separate it from "real life".

Pekar showed us the fifteen-year-old's uncertainty about her first trick. "He wanted to watch two women make love, then... have sex with me. It was barely sex./ Of course we faked it, the woman and me. You always fake it. He's paying for something he didn't really get. That's the only way you can keep any self-respect" (41). Even from the beginning, she was standing outside herself, rationalizing it away. Victor was a girl that most girls can identify with, even those who never turned a trick. Regardless of the daily rationalizations we all make to justify our actions, we all know how much we value self-respect, and when we read between the lines we see Victor grasping at that self-respect.

Pekar's adaptation provides yet another example of how one can structure non-fiction about the everyday, the graphic novel. When Pekar adapted *Working*, he was not just putting pictures to the stories, but he showed us how timeless these accounts of working are. The same tribulations in Terkel's work existed in the 2000's, and they still do now. In fact, they will exist as long as we put people together in a given space, day after day, to work toward a common goal: survival. While Terkel had the option of setting up interviews and devising questions before his interviews, Ehrenreich did not have that luxury. While Terkel's characters knew they were divulging their work stories, Ehrenreich's did not.

Barbara Ehrenreich is a journalist-turned-non-fiction-writer and a civil rights activist, of sorts. Ehrenreich exposed owners and operators of America's minimum wage system when she wrote *Nickel and Dimed*. Like a busted piggy bank, we got to see all the grimy greed for ourselves, because she was willing to submerge herself in a system that proved to be an inescapable hole for the people dependant on it. For Ehrenreich to put her life and family on hold for a year, and to brave loneliness, potentially-dangerous living conditions and a minimum wage paycheck, is to be completely invested in the project. While most writers hope they can pull a

story out of their experiences, Ehrenreich set out to write. She also conducted a significant amount of research, appearing in the form of footnotes, which helped solidify the argument behind that experience.

In 1988, Arkansas state senator Jay Bradford attacked Wal-Mart for paying its employees so little that they had to turn to the state for welfare. He was, however, unable to prove his point by getting the company to open its payroll records (Bob Ortega, *In Sam We Trust: The Untold Story of Sam Walton and Wal-Mart, the World's Most Powerful Retailer* [Times Books, 2000], p. 193). (175)

Where a reader may initially discount Ehrenreich's opinion, information like this demonstrates the workers were not the only ones who were displeased with minimum wage.

Gathering the information for her project presented Ehrenreich with its own challenges, as she was undercover. Journaling played a huge role, "I went home every day not to anything resembling a normal domestic life but to a laptop on which I spent an hour or two recording the day's events-very diligently, I should add, since note taking was seldom an option during the day" (8). In order to be true to the actual events in this type of work, Ehrenreich could not rely on memory, but instead she had to stay as close to actual events as possible. Cold, hard facts were imperative to get past all the possible judgments and layers of scrutiny, and on to the question at hand, "Can she survive on minimum wage?" Although her personal experience made the book an interesting literary work, what she needed to accomplish her goal was the evidence behind that experience. Memory is not fact, but a beautiful combination of what happened and what ideally could have happened in the mind of the memoirist, and it often gives us great insight into the person who reveals it to us, like the way Bourdain recounts his experiences in various New York kitchens.

Bourdain's style is closest to my own, and when I read *Kitchen Confidential* I felt a sense of camaraderie. It reads like a friend, with all the good gossip, who lets you in on the dish. His raw voice and honesty creates trust with the reader. I wanted *My Whine, Your Wine* to do that, and the only way to do it is to tell the brutal truth. If there is anyone who can do that, it is Anthony Bourdain.

Transforming dirty, stifling kitchens into magical places, Bourdain showed us when he was in a good place in his career. "It wasn't unusual to see naked women hosing ice cream off their bodies in the kitchen pot sink (the Howard Stern event); sinister Moroccan food tasters packing heat (Royal Air Maroc Party); Ted Kennedy in a kitchen walk-through eerily reminiscent of RFK's last moments..." (212). When you were a chef in that kitchen, you were in the V.I.P. room, or maybe the few, isolated instances are what stand out most in his memory instead of the everyday grind. At times, in scenes which took place early-on in his career, he dramatizes kitchens the opposite way.

Flames three feet high leaped out of pans, the broiler was crammed with a slowly moving train of steaks... Pasta was blanched and shocked and transferred in huge batches into steaming colanders, falling everywhere, the floor soon ankle-deep in spaghetti alla chitarra, linguine, garganelli, taglierini, fusilli. The heat was horrific. Sweat flowed into my eyes, blinding me as I spun in place. (33)

Surely, those kitchens were not the V.I.P. lounges they seemed like, nor were they sheer hell, but his mood and state of mind during success, or failure, come through in the way he talks about those kitchens. How he paints that picture for the reader is far more valuable than the layout of the equipment or color of the walls.

Bourdain's language is also worth noting, as *Kitchen Confidential* is written the way he

speaks in life and at work. "I wanted it to sound like me talking, at say... ten o' clock on a Saturday night, after a busy dinner rush, me and a few cooks hanging around the kitchen, knocking back a few beers and talking shit" (xiv). It works, and I feel it contributes to the honesty I was talking about. Elevated language is not true to me, and as I was writing about by own experiences as a winemaker for *My Whine, Your Wine*, it would have been inauthentic, almost fictionalizing the voice, to elevate my language. For me, that's worse than a few cloudy details which couldn't possibly change the story.

Bourdain gives it to us straight. "These knuckleheads are even less easy to explain than the novice owner with a hard-on for waitron nookie" (87). We can see this approach to voice as being a useful tool to present who the narrator is, also evident in *My Whine, Your Whine*. "Punching him came to mind and I wondered why I felt that way, why he got to me. He was the chief winemaker after all, and I should have shut my mouth and taken his orders like a good apprentice. It's just too difficult for me to fake it" (40). Even as the words were typed, I could hear myself saying them to a friend while I recounted my day.

Terkel had the advantage of using the actual testimonies uttered by the workers, word for word, and it is fairly obvious that he was attempting to be completely unbiased in his introductions. However, we do catch tidbits of his persona through his short intros. "*We're seated in a car on this wintry afternoon, each of us puffing away at a fifteen-cent cigar*" (219). "*It is an old, established place of some three-hundred rooms. Its furnishings are quite simple, unpretentious*" (247). "*He has come into his private office, tie askew; he's in need of a shave*" (393). "*His long hair is be-ribboned into a ponytail; his glasses are wire-rimmed; his mustache is scraggly and his beard is wispy*" (437). With these little glimpses, we can tell Terkel was the type of guy who had no problem smoking a cigar in a cold car to get the interview. We see what

his personal taste in decor was and know that he was particularly opinionated about personal grooming. Appearance seemed to be indicative of self-respect in his eyes. It was an impression of the kind of person you were, and the unkempt look was obviously not his preference.

We see Ehrenreich through her words in *Nickel and Dimed*. "So, ours is a world of pain-managed by Excedrin and Advil, compensated with cigarettes and, in one or two cases and then only on weekends, with booze...would they take a sadistic pride in what they have purchased-boasting to their dinner guests, for example, that their floors are cleaned only with the purest of fresh human tears?" (89). Although Bourdain is flooded with this honest language, opinions are scattered sparsely in Ehrenreich and we get almost none of Terkel's personality in *Working. My Whine, Your Wine* fits right in with Bourdain, though I can appreciate going undercover, like Ehrenreich, or interviewing other winemakers, like Terkel. Each of their styles lend well to the purpose of each project, proving that in non-fiction you must pick and choose how to seat the situation and the story carefully, and with purpose.

Along with personal narrative, it was important that I provide detailed sections about the act of winemaking. Most people are not privy to the process, all that is involved with the business of winemaking, and even in the way these technical explanations are delivered there can be some insight into the person who is describing them. "Magic happens when yeast is introduced along with the bentonite powder the must is treated with before the Yeastie Boys are introduced. They help each other. As yeast become active, they release carbon dioxide in the form of carbon dioxide bubbles. Those bubbles move the bentonite around and through the liquid, picking up and moving yeast throughout the batch" (52). We can see the connection the narrator has to the process, just in the nickname that is given to the additive as she works. "The pressure of the gold or crimson liquid through the compressed clay pads is sometimes too great. An

overflow reservoir, a cold, stainless steel pan, catches each misplaced drop and funnels them down through another crystal-clear hose and out into a plastic bin" (30). Sadness comes through in this description of the cold steel, the narrator sorry for the wasted drops of wine that never make it into the bottle, but instead end up in a cold, lonely place where they will never be enjoyed.

Bourdain can't hide his passion for food behind procedural descriptions, either. "I've got only a six-burner Garland to work with. There's another range next to it that is taken up with a bain-marie for sauces and onion soup, the rest of it with stocks- veal, chicken, lamb and pork- which will be reducing at a slow simmer all day and into the night" (186). We immediately notice that the stove is not just a stove, but a Garland. This attention to detail gives the narrator authority as a chef. I can almost taste that onion soup and those wonderful stocks that simmered all day. The way he loving lists the ingredients shows what passion he has for food. On the other hand, we can detect his distaste just as easily. "The general manager sits down to lunch with the hostess. Two calamari, no oil, no garlic, a fish special, no sauce..." (194). He could have said two calamari and fish special, sans sauce, but he wanted to point out how this man was mutilating his menu by stripping the recipes of crucial ingredients. We see how Bourdain felt about this guy.

Ehrenreich's descriptions about her jobs made her seem lifeless, like her everyday duties were draining the emotion from her. She didn't have any enthusiasm for what she was doing and she wanted the reader to understand that. Those descriptions helped to set the mood of her story, because the jobs were monotonous and physically draining without reward. "So begins my career at the Hearthside, where for two weeks I work from 2:00 till 10:00p.m. for \$2.43 an hour plus tips. Employees are barred from using the front door, so I enter the first day through the kitchen, where a red-faced man with shoulder-length blond hair is throwing frozen steaks against the wall

and yelling, "Fuck this shit!" (16). Other passages about what was required of her unlocked clues about her character. "No smoking anywhere, or at least not within fifteen minutes of arrival at a house. No drinking, eating, or gum chewing in a house. No cursing in a house, even if the owner is not present, and- perhaps to keep us in practice- no obscenities even in the office" (71). Surely, there were more, but these were the rules that likely irked the narrator most, if I were to infer.

Above all, the best fuel for writing about work is the presence of a challenge. We want to see how the narrators and other characters deal with the act of going to a job each day, how they interact with customers or coworkers, and what they do to relax after a hard day's work. The juiciness never comes from the physical labor, or the building or venue where the work is being performed. Sam Mature, in Terkel's *Working*, is a barber, but his testimony reveals more about how the changing industry is affecting the people he works with at the barber shop, and how the presence or absence of work impacts their lives. Work was separate from real life, even though Sam spent the majority of his waking hours working.

Conversely, Terkel interviewed Elmer Ruiz as a gravedigger, but his testimony turns more to how people should treat each other in life. Ruiz regularly dealt with grieving people, and he was very concerned with how he came across. Though we do get descriptions about the physical labor, those sections are not so alive as the bits about how he conducted himself around the people he worked around. It was personal to him. Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* informs us that, "the writer is on a voyage of discovery" (14). The story is never in the duties on a checklist.

Bourdain wanted to, "tell you about the dark recesses of the restaurant underbelly- a subculture whose centuries-old militaristic hierarchy and ethos of "rum, buggery and the lash"

make for a mix of unwavering order and nerve-shattering chaos- because I find it all quite comfortable, like a nice warm bath" (3-4). Nothing in this description mentions the importance of using the proper equipment or wearing the appropriate clothing for the job, although they come up briefly in the book. What he wants us to know is how he went from being a loud-mouthed punk without any experience in the industry to a respectful, and well-respected, chef. He can pick and choose where he works, from now on, due to his mistakes and how he dealt with them. That's what I'm talking about, and that is where it's at.

Ehrenreich set out to get a first-hand look at how people live when they work for minimum wage, just to write about it. What we got was the story of her personal struggle to fit in. She discovered some things, what she was willing to tolerate and what sent her into tantrums. "... a full-scale epidermal breakdown is under way... wondering if my speckled and inflamed appearance will be enough to get me sent home... The itching gets so bad at night that I have mini-tantrums, waving my arms and stamping my feet to keep from scratching or bawling" (87-88). Dedicated to her cause, she worked through the annoyances to get the story, but not without showing us who Barbara Ehrenreich is. "...can identify with... me, and imagine that I am much like themselves- a person with rights, who is used to being treated with some modicum of respect. They could flinch at my mistakes, cringe at the humiliations, and vicariously share my exhaustion" (225). Without that major element, *Nickel and Dimed* would not be so well read, or as significant in the literary community.

My Whine, Your Wine is not the result of daily documentation and research, like Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. It is not based on speaking with other winemakers and compiling interviews, like Terkel's *Working*. Instead, like Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*, *My Whine, Your Wine* is a manifesto of sorts. It is based on my own memories of what happened in my early years

as a winemaker, and although memory is fallible I believe the true story is in how I encountered and dealt with my own limitations. According to Gornick, the story remains true if, "the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand" (91). Therefore, *My Whine, Your Wine* is my truth and the way I feel about those years remains constant. To get the ugly out is what I always strive to do when I write about my experiences. The ugliest part of what you did, the part you least want to talk about, is the most interesting part, and without it you leave out a chunk of who the person on that page is. The reader cannot identify with part of a person. They need the whole sha-bang.

When I wrote about how I piss off everyone I work with, in *My Whine, Your Wine*, that I am an unbearable coworker is completely embarrassing. Why would I want people to know what a terrible bitch I am? Simply, I would be cheating the reader if I did not include it. How else would they know why the other Su Vino employees react to me the way they do? I couldn't, in all good conscience, portray them as a gaggle of crazy people and myself as a clueless angel.

Bourdain was so ashamed of how long he allowed his dead Christmas tree to linger in his dining room, he, "[chopped] it up like a dead body and [stuffed] it in plastic bags before lugging it in the dead of night a few floors down and leaving it near a known coke dealer's doorway" (153). Imagine, after all that effort to conceal the embarrassing tree, writing about the very thing he was trying to hide from his neighbors, for all to read. He revealed it because it was part of his persona, because it gave us a picture of what his dwelling looked like and how he lived. That memory also happened to present a great image which mirrored his references to the mobsters he encountered in his past, but that was a pleasant bonus.

Even when you try to remain a background character to the main story about minimum wage workers, when things about your experience present you with an opportunity to get the ugly

out, you must oblige. Ehrenreich embraced her opportunities and gave us a piece of herself at every turn. A tantrum here, a call to her doctor back home in the real world there, and there was her reaction to that drug test Wal-Mart requires. "...there has been a chemical indiscretion in recent weeks... [involving] the only drug usually detected by testing, marijuana... What if Claritin-D, which gives you a nice little bounce, shows up as crystal meth? (125). With each of her human moments, we identify more and more, and the narrator becomes someone just like us, although I imagine she might have taken a bit more ownership of that, "indiscretion"

Just as Bourdain did not want to make enemies of the restaurant owners he worked for, "I'd still *like* to be a chef, too, when this [book] comes out, as this life is the only life I really know" (3), I hope my boss continues to value me when he reads *My Whine, Your Wine*, but I cannot censor the ugly details because I want to keep my job, or this thing won't be interesting. Hopefully, I have done much more good than harm, just as Bourdain ultimately proved that even after divulging all the ugly little things, the truth shines through. He is, after all, a great chef with a head for business, and I'd like to think I'm on my way, at least, to being on par with him in my tiny sector of the food and beverage industry.

Ehrenreich wasn't too concerned with losing her job, but she was still the star of her exposé, and with that comes the obligation to total truth. This could present a problem when revealing negative experiences related to people you write about, but what goes around comes around. "Hence the undeserved charisma of a man like Ted... If for some reason there's a shortage of houses to clean, he'll keep a team busy by sending them out to clean his own home, which, I am told, is "real nice" (117). It seemed she didn't have too much trouble outing her mean bosses. "...to make up for a particularly unwarranted attack on my abilities... he tells me about his glory days as a young man at "coronary school" in Brooklyn, where he dated a knockout Puerto Rican

chick- or do you say "culinary"?" (21). Balancing the research element with personal essay was successfully done in *Nickel and Dimed*, because Ehrenreich used total disclosure.

When it all comes down, the structure must fit the story, the situation and the writer's style and voice. Variety is good when it comes to anything, especially when we are talking about literature. *My Whine, Your Wine* is a jumping off point, and it opens the door to future projects with varied structures. For example, if I were to go Terkel's route, I could interview winemakers from around the U.S., or even around the world, and compile the interview material. Surely, it would be very interesting to know how different the regions are and the ways each of them works around the limitations of the land. If I were to go Ehrenreich's way, I would apply at several wineries and become a part of whatever story emerges. Night-time note-taking and day-time acting to figure out the shortcuts or specialized procedures could be fun.

Either way, I grew up at Su Vino. Somehow, this is the one job out of all of the positions I've held which allows me to consider my work a lesser priority in my life. The others were all-consuming and stressful, but Su Vino changed the definition of what a job is for me. Physical labor and all, I still have the time to write and hang out with my family and friends, while performing work that is a pleasure to do. The tradition involved with winemaking is something I am proud to be a part of, and I feel connected to the places where each wine originates.

Grapes hold the flavors of the lands where they grow, and when I make wine from them, those flavors of the land come through. To taste wine from a place you've been brings you back to that place through aromas and notes indicative of that place. A bottle of wine changes every day, and how it will taste depends on the moment you choose to release it from the glass walls. I have a vested interest in wine, because it is a living thing, and I am compelled to make wine because the characteristics in it are like personality traits. Although some of those characteristics

are harsh at times, I appreciate them all because each plays an important role in the balance, or the overall personality. Like my own personality flaws, wine's harsh tones can smooth over time. My relationship with wine is constantly evolving, with every new varietal, vintage, batch and blend. I cherish every moment of my winemaking career, and *My Whine, Your Wine* is the story of how it began.

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PART II

MY WHINE, YOUR WINE

Charcoal, apricot, currant, vanilla, pepper, licorice, chocolate, coffee -- these flavors come through in wine made from grapes grown in soils around the world. Breathing in cherries, grapefruits, French oak or even dirt, the nose gives out clues. Buttery notes, or those which are crisp, fruity, acidic, woody or tannic mingle on our tongues. A symphony of stimulating flavors, each note sounds in an almost musical way through your palate and into the sides of your jaw or up through the roof of your mouth and into the top of your nasal cavity. Those tingly sensations, your mouth's reaction to what the grapes have become, add to the experience. Senses play together to create the magic in a glass of wine.

Hold your newly-poured glass up to the light, or in front of a bright white cloth or sheet of paper, and already your eyes are engaged in the experience. Ruby, golden, crystal clear, violet or crimson dazzles and sparkles in the glass as you hold it to the side by its stem and gaze. Swirl the wine in the glass. The swirl is important, to stretch its legs and open up wine that has been caged in its bottle for months or years, even decades. It needs to breathe, they'll tell you, and they are right. I always indulge a little longer in the swirl, and suggest you do the same. This moment, before you get a taste, is foreplay, almost seductive with legs, beautiful color, and endless possibilities.

Bring your nose just inside the opening of the glass. If the rim is large enough, bury your whole nose and mouth in the glass and breathe deep. This is a whole body experience. Impatient taste buds can hardly take the anticipation. They're ready to burst with it until your lips finally reach the edge of the glass and linger there for one last, delicious moment of torture, right before your tongue comes forward to accept the elixir as the glass tips toward you.

The wine explodes into melodic, rolling tones on all parts of the tongue at once, each flavor unrolling separately until your palate is covered like sheet music; staffs full of quarter

notes, whole notes, bass, treble. Flavors work together to make a cohesive explosion. Draw air across the liquid as you hold it on your tongue, and notice how it changes. Now, the entire orchestra is unleashed, a grand finale, and the next sip is completely different than the first.

If only a human personality was easily balanceable, as wine can be with oak or tannins, I might have been in a position to manipulate my own to my advantage, but like wine, significant aging and constant awareness were required to smooth out my rocky notes.

Feigning confidence, I'd offered up my services as a winemaker at Su Vino Winery in 2009, but I had no idea what the hell I was doing. I never grew out of the, "You can do anything you set your mind to," mentality that my parents and high school counselors crammed into my head. Maybe I haven't been burned badly enough to become bitter, yet, but I still feel powerful, invincible. Opportunities don't present themselves often, and I imagine you only get one crack at becoming a professional winemaker... so I faked it. Maybe the false confidence was part of a boneless master plan, but it got me the job. I had my work cut out for me from the moment I made that ballsy move. Failure was not an option, because I'd worked so hard to weasel my way into the business.

Su Vino's head winemaker was Andrew, a friend of a friend. Since we'd been in several social situations together, I considered him a friend of mine. When I found out he worked at a winery, which I imagined was a magical place full of fun and merriment, I hounded poor Andrew about getting in there to help out. Most times, he just gave me a pleasant, "I'll let you know if we

need anyone." Then, when he actually did need help, Andrew called our mutual friend. The moment I got the message, I called to let him know I was interested.

"Just for about a week, to help us catch up on our bottling load," he said. Andrew was laid-back, he'd been to several PHISH shows, and we got along perfectly. His spiral curls formed a perfectly-shaggy, white-boy fro. Smiling, his dimple was the deepest I'd ever seen, like a Cabbage Patch Kid. Andrew regularly described himself as being, "such a fat kid when it comes to food," but I thought he was an average size.

"I'll do anything to make a little cash right now," I said. "Thanks for thinking of me. When can I start?" What I really meant was, I'm cool, not the dork you could have hired for this job. No, you're hiring the cool chick.

With that, I was in, but I had no idea our little conversation would lead me to the best job I've had in my life. Work is something we do so that we can have the other things we love in life, but it ends up consuming us if we are not careful. My employment history started at age fifteen, at Six Flags over Texas, selling tickets at the front gate of the obnoxious theme park. From there, I survived a day care facility, waiting tables and bartending, a chain of tanning salons, swimwear stores, a telemarketing gig, and a water park. To make wine would be the best by far, at least on paper. Glamorous to the ears, it seemed to me a fun and interesting job that was also quite respectable, a marriage of what others expect of me and what I desire.

The morning after that conversation with Andrew, I drove to the winery, ready to impress them into keeping me around. Past experience dictated that my boss would love me, so I had it in mind to stay much longer than the week we had discussed. After seeing all those shiny bottles nestled in their raw, wooden racks through the windows, I was as giddy as a kid on Christmas morning, sparkly eyes and all. I knocked for several minutes to be let in. Now, I didn't expect a

red carpet, but nobody greeted me except the girl who opened the door with a, "Hello, can I help you?"

"Oh, hi," I said. I extended my hand. "I'm Shannon," and when there was no recognition, "I'm the new girl." When that didn't trigger anything I simply asked, "Is Andrew here?"

Flustered, she disappeared through a small doorway next to a wall of wine, stacked from floor to ceiling with loaded, cedar racks. There were a few people milling around, but nobody seemed to notice or care that there was a stranger among them. Every time I'd started a job there was someone who knew I was supposed to be there, someone who guided me through my first day so I wasn't standing around like an idiot. No such luck this time. Instead, the ones who did glance in my direction looked at me sideways. I thought, "Maybe it's my clothes."

Gray slacks and a plain, black top over a camisole that tamed my breasts enough to draw the attention to my face; it had become a ritual of mine, especially on a first day at work. I was self-conscious about the way a bra makes them look, standing out and begging to be noticed. The damned things give off the wrong idea if I want to be taken seriously. Besides, I already had the blonde hair working against me, and as much as I wish that stereotype was all in my head, it's not. My gray and black, conservative-yet-feminine outfit was my best answer to Andrew's business-casual request. Everyone else had on slacks or jeans, except for the guy who wore MC Hammer pants in bright blue and orange. Later, I would hear more than one fashion police joke about the poor guy.

The girl who let me in appeared again, after alerting the owner to my presence. Extended hand, I eagerly introduced myself as Andrew's friend. The owner, David, seemed very easy-going and I immediately felt relieved. Some entrepreneurs are cool and some are such micro-managers, nobody can stand to work for them. I could tell David was cool. He was nothing like Andrew's

description. I hadn't pictured him to be so round and timid, thinking instead that he would be more like the big, Greek man I once worked for. David didn't ask me a bunch of questions or grill me about my work history, instead directing me straight to Andrew, pointing to an area in the back of the store.

One foot in front of the other, I admired the glass bottle-stoppers, Christmas ornaments and wine glasses in the boutique as I made my way around displays and racks that jutted up from the glossy floor in the lobby. For a moment, I thought about how unprofessional it seemed that nobody was leading me to the back or even knew I was coming, but then I decided it wasn't in my best interest to start out with that attitude. It would only get in the way of a good thing. It was a 90-degree, summer day in Texas, a cool one for this time of year, and the air-conditioned winery sported Christmas trees decked with holiday cheer. It was a little jarring, but festive and fun. Single, I rarely put up a Christmas tree in my own home, instead waiting until I got to my parents' house for the holiday to enjoy theirs, but right then, I imagined having a Christmas tree with only these fancy decorations: tiny wine-glass ornaments and grapevines with lights inside each grape draped all over my perfect wine tree. Classical music floated through the air, and even though I felt a little out of place, I was thrilled to be a part of it. Behind all those trinkets they were slinging was a magical process called winemaking.

Classical music faded into jammy tunes as I crossed the barrier into the fermentation room, where Andrew was working and music blared from two tiny speakers. Each employee in that room was busy with tasks, mostly involving cleaning or sanitizing the various tubes, containers and machine parts necessary for the tasks at hand. Longing to jump in and help with the winemaking things, I waited for Andrew to finish what he was doing while I fiddled with my hands and smelled strange fumes in the air from the sodium metabisulphite they were using to

sanitize. It burns the nose hairs and makes you sneeze and cough when those vapors sneak into your head, salty but soapy on the tongue. Equipment intrigued me, and I wanted to know where the tubes went, what the machines did, and how they all fit into the process of making wine. I secretly wondered if Andrew was good at his job and whether or not his wine was as delicious as I hoped.

“Hey, Shannon,” he said. He gave me a half-hug with his gloved hands, seemingly censoring his usual greeting; I assumed trying to separate our friendship from work. “Thanks for coming in,” he said.

“No problem! I'm excited,” I said. “What can I do to start?” I was eye-balling the tubes and machines hard-core at this point.

“Come out here and I'll show you the bottling station,” he said.

With that, he ushered me right back into the classical sounds out front, where more employees were hard at work. The part of the store they called the bottling station was a large island, about 12'x 8', with identical equipment on both sides: double sinks, plastic bottle-trees for drying bottles, bottle-filling machines, pneumatic corking machines, heat guns and metal sleds with heated coils for shrinking those pretty foil caps onto the bottlenecks, and bins full of new corks. The place was set up so two different wines could be bottled simultaneously, either by the staff or guests who paid top-dollar to make their own batches and bottle it themselves.

“I'm going to set up the station to show you how it is done, and then I'll have you wash bottles. You'll probably just stick with that today.”

“Okay, great,” I said. Increasing my enthusiasm to hide disappointment was an old trick. Cooperation leads to opportunity, but whining leads to annoyance. This was one of many pep talks I had been working on for myself when I felt like I was going to do something to jeopardize

my chances of success. Even though I was not clued in half as much as I should have been, I knew I could be opinionated and overbearing. That part of me did not prove helpful at work, and had been my downfall in the past.

You have to start somewhere, I thought, as I considered the first wine I ever tried. The concoction, by the name of Strawberry Hill, was a cheap, sticky-sweet disaster, but I was 17 years old, and without a clue. To be clear, I never liked the snobby-wine-type, and even now when the vernacular of the industry escapes my own mouth, I cringe a little at the thought that someone might overhear me and think I am one of those people. At first sip, the strawberry stuff wasn't what I expected from an alcoholic drink. My research had included sips of Dad's rum-n-cokes and Mom's red wine, but this was liquid-candy; it was fruit punch and I drank it from the bottle until it was gone. That was before hangovers.

“Okay, here we go,” Andrew said. I snapped back to reality. He showed me how much sodium metabisulphite powder to squirt from the plastic bottles and how much water to add into the bottle-washer, a container with a nozzle in the center that squirted when you pushed a bottle down on top of it and sucked solution from the container as it rose back to starting position. He rinsed the bottles over another nozzle attached to the faucet. “And, the bottles just go upside-down on the pegs in the bottle-tree to dry. It's boring, I know, but I really appreciate the help.”

“Andrew, seriously, I'll do whatever. I love being part of the process.” I smiled and worked with that smile on my face through every bottle I washed.

At lunch that day, Andrew took me to a place down the street he loved and we made small talk. Now that we were working together, we had real things to talk about, stuff about the business.

“What do you think of David?” Andrew asked.

“He seems pretty cool, but I haven't gotten to talk to him much. Why?” I asked.

“Nothing...” He said. “The first time I met him, I thought he was gay!” We laughed at the thought. There was that dimple again. “I mean, the guy's married and everything, but there was just something about him.”

“No, I mean, I didn't get that from him at all, but now that you mention it, he has unusually great taste for a straight guy, doesn't he?” The merchandising in the store was impeccable. We laughed about first impressions as I pictured David in some bear club, having a fantastic time and dancing to techno music. Would he be a bear, though? He's a large man, but I think bears are hairy, too, so maybe not a bear club, but a gay club nonetheless... not a pretty picture.

“Sorry to bring it up,” Andrew said. I must have had an awful look on my face at the thought of it. Laughing, we bonded over our mutual boss, and I began to feel like I would fit in just fine at the winery.

I must have impressed someone, because on the second day David asked me to stay on, part-time, which I jumped at. Besides, I graduated to setting up the bottling station from start to finish, then to filling and corking bottles, and on to capping and labeling in no time. On day three, David's wife and business partner, Chari, asked if I would mind writing some articles about wine and wine accessories for the website. Now, I was suddenly able to justify my desire to make wine by using my English degree at work for a little extra cash.

The second week, they trained me on importing new products into the website, inputting all of our seasonal products, writing descriptions and thinking up article ideas. I did anything and everything they asked me to do, because the more one person can do, the fewer specialized people they need on staff. I planned to hint around to Andrew about wanting to learn more about

what he did. Just as things were popping into place, I learned Andrew was planning a move to California. Disappointment came over me at the idea of him leaving me there to fend for myself.

I didn't have anything in common with The Bottlers, which were a group of men and women in their 50's and 60's who working to keep active. There was the guy with the Hammer pants and his wife, and a girl who seemed to be in training to help Andrew. The Bartenders were mostly older ladies with a few younger ladies mixed in. It wouldn't have mattered if they were my age, anyway, because they mostly worked on the weekends, when I wasn't around.

A woman by the name of Pauline, who had been there since the winery opened, was our floor manager. She was always dressed to the nines, arriving a half-hour before each shift so she could sit down and eat her lunch right before her shift started. I think she felt it was her duty to be as big a bitch to the new people as she could, and I could tell she had a special distaste for the younger members of the staff. Pauline always seemed to be lurking a few feet away, waiting for someone to make a mistake so she could correct them.

"Stay on her good side," Andrew said. The recommendation came after he heard a particularly sharp conversation between her and me about the proper way to foil a bottle. I kept my cool, but he somehow knew it would be good to stop that snowball. "David listens to her, for some reason."

Then, there was Doug, a Harley-riding grandpa, who just so happened to be David's father-in-law. That's right; we had a family member on the production crew, too. As far as I could tell, Doug was one of Andrew's assistants, but I couldn't tell where he sat in the hierarchy. Right about this time, he was thinking the same thing I was about Andrew's leaving. "I'm going to be a winemaker," I thought to myself the whole way home. Turning up the stereo, I was unconcerned about the traffic, for once, and sung loudly to CAKE. Things were about to get a whole lot more

interesting.

Some people would say that I'm not a real winemaker. They say I skip the most intricate part, the most difficult. I live in squelching-hot, freezing-cold North Texas, and as much as I would like to, I don't grow my own grapes. Cracked and depleted soil, from both extremes in temperature, does not lend itself well to supporting the fragile vines. Instead, we import them from all over the world, and when I get them they are in the form of juice or must. Must is made of grape skins and pulp, traditionally used for making red wines. Juice is just that: grape juice, strained of all solids for white wines and lighter reds or rosés.

From there, the wine making process actually begins, but many in this business agree that a winemaker with no vineyard is not something one should advertise. Maybe it is because the "real" winemakers spent thousands of dollars on formal education in the field and I did not. My dollars were spent on education, too, but not in the field. I wonder, though, what is wrong with good, old fashioned apprenticeship? Hands-on is the only way for me to know what is really working, and although I see the importance of the classes offered in those programs, I feel any disadvantages can be remedied by good, old-fashioned research.

The home lab and the fermentation rooms at the winery are where I get to be my other self, a person who is not afraid to experiment. I am seasoned. I have confidence in my abilities and I no longer care how anyone feels about the career I have chosen. There will always be something in it for me, something to learn from the experience, hills and valleys, rewards and sacrifices, like the overflow from the filtering process. The pressure of the gold or crimson liquid through the compressed clay pads is sometimes too great. An overflow reservoir, a cold, stainless

steel pan, catches each misplaced drop and funnels them down through another crystal-clear hose and out into a plastic bin. Those bins have become less full as time goes on, as I learn little tricks to alleviate pressure or avoid the solids while racking the liquid off the top, but only recently has it become like clockwork. I am just now beginning to scratch the surface of expertise.

The process itself is satisfying, to come out with a product that will continue to grow and change in its little bottle over months or years. Wine is a living thing. Like me, wine has an immature phase and a period of time where it is at its best before eventually degrading into a tired version of itself. Wine dies, transforming into a veil of what it once was- gourmet vinegar with a hint of the wine's youth. Oxygen is forever the enemy. However, the very thing that is detrimental to wine is necessary to my own body. I breathe it into my lungs, and wine's cork fends it off as long as possible.

Lashing out at the naysayers is an instant reaction for me. Suspect everyone, I say. People dream of rising to the top, and I'm no exception. Becoming a female winemaker, even at the small winery I work for, is contrary to the male-dominated tradition of my trade, but that is just the kind of challenge I seek out. I'll do anything to prove people wrong. Bring on the preconceived notions. Most of my accomplishments started out as a way to make my parents and friends proud to know me. I wanted to be one of the people they talked about when they discussed the successful ones in their lives. My biggest rush comes from surprising people with my ability to do something, and do it well. I'm still trying to please my parents at age 34. Most things I do are for validation. All the boys I ever dated, Jasons and Andrews, Scott, Brad, Kyle and Rob the Rock-star, extracted a different part of my personality... or maybe I was inventing new parts of my personality to help fit into their puzzles.

The one thing all of these relationships, long and short, had in common was my effort to

tailor myself to them. If he liked hard rock, my internal rocker came out. When he was into hockey, I learned to love the sport, and when he developed a love for wine, I discovered I loved it, too. To my girlfriends, I would often say, "Don't change yourself for a man, girl." Hypocritical, I couldn't see it in myself. But, hey, if I hadn't molded myself, I wouldn't have become a wine-lover, nor would I be where I am now.

As I write, I carry an insecurity that I cannot fend off, and the same is true when I make wine. Concern that failure is lurking around the corner, that I will not do the grapes justice, thus offending the unknowing grower, is always at the back of my mind. Champagne can only come from France, and even the best sparkling wines of Sonoma will never be called champagne because of the soil where the grapes were grown. I do not have the luxury of having my own vines to cultivate, and I long to come full-circle. My own doubts about being a full-fledged winemaker hinge on the absence of these vines. If the climate were conducive, I would grow my own, adding complexity to my home lab and making me a "real" winemaker, as it were.

Traipsing around the vines, testing brix and researching what to do if this or that happened, I would nurse the fruit to life. Another tier in my mad scientist cake, which already has multiple layers but no icing, is that cultivation. Cake is pretty good alone, but who serves it without icing? I want to be able to say, "I made this from scratch." Nobody really cares whether or not I grew the grapes in my wine except me, thus far. People say, "This is delicious," or, "This has a lot of character," but they do not know I am an imposter. Someone else sweated over those grapes, decided which varieties to grow, and waited out the years before they could use the grapes for wine at all. Someone else suffered through sleepless nights around harvest time, worrying that the brix wouldn't come up or down to the appropriate level of sugar for fermentation, and that person sighed with relief when it was all over.

I did none of these things, instead receiving a sterile, double-layered, plastic bladder of must and fermenting it into what the grower always hoped it could be. Although I keep him in mind as I hum to the juice and must whilst pouring it into the tanks, the grower will never have the pleasure of tasting my final product, just as I will never have the chance to surprise or disappoint him. I'm continually off the hook. Secretly, when I am particularly proud of a batch, I imagine the grower giving me the thumbs-up, signaling his approval.

My wine vocabulary did not come from attending classes and seminars, or by making flashcards, but by listening to the people around me when I went to tastings and wine bars. A quiet and young blonde girl in the corner, it was easy to sit undisturbed, regularly snubbed by the others. I'm great at regurgitating information to establish myself as the recognized expert. All I had to do was observe and silently learn as people were describing what they tasted, sipping from wine glasses so big you could bury your face in them. I appreciated those wine snobs, and I mimicked the hell out of them. A great palate does not a winemaker make, but it doesn't hurt, and mine seemed to have no problem picking up the flavors they described.

To comprehend how a Zinfandel can be set off by a wonderful steak, both peppery and rich, or to know that a sweet Gewurztraminer pairs beautifully with a creamy goat cheese is something that is learned. My initial love for wine was based on the idea that wine was chic, but pairing food with wine is chemistry. This science sparked my passion for making wine. It seems impossible that one could be a winemaker and not a foodie. They go hand in hand, peas and carrots.

With such a large number of grape varieties, it would take years of dedicated research to know them all. I still have not discovered even half of them for myself, each grape variety flourishing in a different part of the world. Each glass of wine has distinct characteristics from

the flavor in the grapes, which includes anything grown around the grapes. The terroir, or the flavors of the land it was grown in, can be a deliciously dirty flavor. Even though I make wine professionally, I still am amazed that we can preserve the flavor of the land all the way through the brutal fermentation process.

David knew he was leaving a month in advance, but I think he was expecting Andrew to stay after he offered him a substantial pay increase. Andrew didn't accept that offer, though, and David didn't have a Plan-B. If there was ever a fated moment for me, this was it. It was then that I did something very stupid and presumptuous.

“Hey, David,” I asked. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Well, I just wanted to tell you I'm interested in helping out in the back, if you haven't hired anyone,” I said. A far cry from what I rehearsed, it was supposed to go like this: I would love the opportunity to work in the back. I'm fascinated by the process, and I know I can handle it.

“Would you rather do our office management, like you're doing now, or would you rather be in production?” David asked.

“Well, to be honest I'd much rather be on the production side... but you could train me to do everything, and I can help out all-around, if you would prefer,” I said.

“Okay, well, if you think you can handle it, we'll have you start training with Andrew tomorrow.” David gave me the chance to make wine in that moment, and there was no hiccup in his voice or his expression. Confidence in a stranger to do the job without any real experience

was all I saw.

“Great! Thank you, David. I'm excited to do it,” I said. Keeping my cool until I got outside and into my car was torture. Then, I couldn't help but let out a loud, “Whoooooo!”

That was a week before Andrew's last day. I had to get down to business and dedicate myself to learning the process. I was prepared for long hours and sore brain tissue. The next morning, I started promptly by sanitizing anything Andrew needed and getting to know Doug. I met him previously, but I was never close enough to the winemakers to speak with him. Andrew said Doug started 3 weeks before me, but the way he was training us, at the same pace and time, made it seem like we were pretty much on the same level of knowledge.

What struck me most about Doug was his inquisitive nature. Andrew's answers didn't seem to satisfy him. I wondered if he was honestly that curious, or if he was trying to rock the boat by taking up all of our time with trivial debates. Doug is one of those people who can instantly come up with ten reasons not to do something the way he was trained. You spend ten minutes debating about why we do things the way we do them. I would say know-it-all, but it's more like he's a know-it-better, as in, he knows better than you. Doug was a threat, because I knew that no matter how great a winemaker I became, Doug would still be the father-in-law.

"When did you decide you wanted to do this?" he asked.

"What? Work here? Make wine?" I asked.

"Make wine, back here with us," he said.

"I don't know, but when I taste all of those wonderful flavors that can come from grapes, it is fascinating, don't you think? I mean, that all of those flavors can come out?" I must have sounded like a serious wine-snob, but I was truly fascinated with wine.

"I guess," he said.

At that point, I knew Doug wasn't a wine-drinker, and he was there only because his son-in-law had given him the opportunity to come help out. By the end of the day, I got the feeling he had a horrible, nagging wife at home and he was working at Su Vino to get some time away from her.

"She gets stressed. David and Chari asked us to take Cade the other day, and she won't hardly do that anymore. It's too much for her."

"That's too bad. I've never heard of a grandparent that would prefer not to watch their grandchild, no offense," I said. I immediately wanted to retract the statement.

"That's alright. We used to take him all the time, but she can't hardly stand it. He's too wild for her," he said.

I immediately felt sorry for Doug, who was a very nice, but defeated, man. Cade seemed like a normal kid to me, though I had only met him twice by then, when he came to the winery with his parents. Regardless, I decided Doug was an ally, and I was grateful to have one. I had the feeling most of the staff was in on a private joke I wasn't privy to.

When Andrew's last day rolled around, it was up to Bob and I to make sure production ran smoothly. Bob, an older man I'd met a couple of times in my 3 weeks at Su Vino, was our new chief winemaker. A pilot for private jets, he was Andrew's assistant, but didn't come into the winery much. Bob was also Pauline's husband, so they were like a small-time winery power-couple. According to Andrew, Bob would be coming in more often until I got the hang of things. Still, I didn't know Bob. All I could think about was that he wasn't in a position to mentor me or to steer me in the right direction if he wasn't going to be there every day. I was on my own.

Every night, I went home and glued my eyes to my laptop, in search of any and all information I could get from the internet on wine and wine making. I was a sponge again, just as

I had been every time I started working somewhere new, or began a new class or took on a hobby. Information on fermentation times, ideal temperatures, additives, I soaked it all up, but still had very little knowledge about the process... because I only knew how to do it on paper. My game plan was to stay as close to the instructions Andrew gave as possible, use my research to supplement and hope for the best.

“It is better to stand around and think about what you are doing for a whole hour than to rush through something and mess it up,” Andrew said. Advising me to do this on more than a few occasions, he was a big proponent of taking a long time to think before beginning a task, like an old man who takes pride in his painstaking work. Andrew has nothing pressing, nowhere else to be and no sense of urgency. I was envious of this, because even though I made a conscious effort to lead my life in a relaxed state, I couldn't let go of the anxiety, for fear I might fall through a hole in the track.

Andrew's last weekend in town happened to be the weekend of a huge birthday party I was having. Though I invited him, I didn't expect him to show up. Stressing the importance of dressing for the theme, I told him he shouldn't feel obligated, but that I'd love to hang out with him before he left us. To my delight, he walked into the huge backyard where various games of beer die were under way and the hot tub was crammed to the gills with people, smiling along the way until he found me. Dressed in a toga, as I'd instructed, his dimple was his best accessory.

"Thanks for coming!" I said.

"Hey! Are you ready to be responsible for all that wine?" he asked. It was the first time I saw real doubt in his face, and it freaked me out.

"I have to be ready," I said. "It'll be fine."

"Well, the first time you have a big fuck-up, I want you to call me. There will be a huge

fuck-up, you know, but it's probably going to be okay. When that happens, I want you to call me."

"I can't believe you're leaving me already."

I was terrified, but ready to take it on. I knew that if I was able to make great wine right out of the gate, I would deserve the respect I desired. Day by day, I grasped the rhythm of the process, and in Andrew's absence I found my own groove.

I liked Bob because he seemed like a hip old man. White hair bright against his tan skin, he fit the profile of the customers I used to have when I worked at the tanning salon. *Feed Your Ego* was the slogan pasted over the counter, and the customers generally lived up to it. I found their self-confidence satisfying back then, since my job was to make people feel good about themselves. When they felt good, they kept doing the things that made them feel good, and I continued to get their business. The same was true with the wine. If people weren't buying it, we wouldn't be making it. Confidence paired with charm was Bob to a T.

In the first couple of weeks without Andrew, I did more research into the wee hours of the mornings. Lists of commonly-made mistakes were especially helpful. Bob was there, back then, to do the hard stuff, and he definitely did everything when it came to the tanks, where large batches were made. I was still small-time, sticking to the smaller, six-gallon batches in the fermentation room.

The larger tanks, or red tanks, hold about 144 gallons while the smaller, white tanks hold 78 gallons. All the tanks are stainless steel, but they are named red and white for the types of wine we make in them. I wasn't comfortable with the heavy valves and hoses, because I didn't know where they were supposed to attach to the tanks and pump. Even if I had, I didn't know how the pump worked or how the nitrogen tank operated. What was that nitrogen tank for, anyway? So much information was newly-squeezed into my memory banks. I couldn't cram in

much more until some of that information moved into long-term storage. The winemaking steps just swam around in there, getting mingled and confused. When Bob came in to ask how I was doing, I gave him a detailed run-down. He was always sure to tell me I didn't have to be so tedious, but I stuck to Andrew's advice because he seemed to really care about the wine. Bob liked wine, but his work at Su Vino was not his first priority.

Even though I knew this about him, Bob had me falling into an old pattern, molding myself to meet his expectations; twisting and manipulating myself into a winemaker. There were things he refused to teach me, changing the subject when I brought them up. I asked difficult questions after my nightly home-research sessions to impress him, but I could tell it only annoyed him. He couldn't, or didn't answer about fifty percent of the questions I asked, and I figured it was because he was holding back. Of course, in my mind he was trying to keep me down, because when people threatened me I got paranoid and defensive. As long as I could catch myself going down that path, though, I would be able to keep our relationship amicable, even though I wanted to ask, "Do you have a problem with me, or do you just not think I can handle it?"

My research began to directly contradict the things Bob asked me to do, after a few months. At first, I made a note of these discrepancies and took the notes home at night to research why his instructions didn't match up. Most of the time, there is more than one way to do something. However, when I conducted my investigations, they often came up empty. I couldn't find any information to justify some of the shortcuts we were making, or the fixes he was using to correct wine when it didn't come out the way it should have. Bob got to the point where he was always scrambling to fix things that weren't acceptable, including dumping a gallon of glycerin, for extra mouth-feel, into nearly every red tank we made, or turning a stuck fermentation into some sweet monstrosity.

"We're now making cinnamon-apple Chardonnay," he said. Our expensive Chardonnay tank was stuck.

"Are you sure you don't want to try and fix the stuck fermentation first?" I asked. I'd read about stuck fermentations in my nightly sessions, so when David was within earshot I spoke up about it.

"No, it's gone. We have to make it sell-able. I've been working on this all morning," Bob said. "I have done quite a bit of research on stuck fermentations lately. I know I'm still kind of new and everything, but the worst that could happen is that we end up right where we are now."

"Tru-hust me," he said. He shot me a look that said I was intruding on his expertise and ego. "It's gone."

Punching him came to mind and I wondered why I felt that way, why he got to me. He was the chief winemaker after all, and I should have shut my mouth and taken his orders like a good apprentice. It's just too difficult for me to fake it. Everything he did started to grind on my nerves, because we were not working together to make the wine as great as it could be. Instead, he would come in and begin several tasks on my day off, leaving me to execute the rest of the steps on my own. Starting batches is the easy part, but maintaining them is another story.

On top of Bob's antics, Doug, the Harley-riding grandpa, didn't last long. Doug's jolly demeanor began to change right after I started organizing our daily tasks and delegating them out. Someone had to do it. Besides, the physical labor involved in our job was too much for him. It is certainly too much for me at times. When we got shipments of must, juice and bottles, it was often up to the two of us to unload everything from their pallets and put it away. A few times, in the heat of July and August, I thought he was going to die, literally. Doug actually stopped doing a lot of what was required of him because it was taking a toll on his body, which meant I had to

take on the extra labor, an unfortunate side-effect. Negativity sprang from Doug's mouth from the moment he arrived in the morning to the moment he left for the day, and I had to find out why he felt this way.

"What's the matter? It's a gorgeous day and we make wine for a living," I said. I was trying to make a joke about his scowl so we could start the day on a good note.

"I used to enjoy coming in here," he said.

Refusing to justify his comment with a response, I whistled on with my work. The best move for me was to give him the tasks he enjoyed, in order to minimize resistance, and ignore that scowl. By this time, I owned what I was doing at work. Tanks were my friends, along with all their hoses and clamps. Tasks for the week were organized and delegated by me, because someone had to take charge and put some order to what we were doing. Bob sure as hell wasn't there enough to take it on, so I naturally slid into that role. I'm a born-leader, what can I say? Unfortunately, I needed help with how to communicate those responsibilities to my coworkers. I was to-the-point, with only one mission in mind: Get this wine made and make it great. To-the-point translated to bitchy and controlling, though.

Not long after that, Doug couldn't take it anymore. We had a long day ahead of us, and from the time I woke up that morning, I had lists running through my head; we need to rack the Riesling, stop fermentation, end the oak aging in those Merlot batches and start the Chianti. When I informed Doug what we had on our to-do list for the day, I had already come to terms with what that meant... a longer day.

"It might mean that we stay a little longer today, but we'll get it done." I said. I hopped around and smiled as I hooked up a big hose to the tank with a large, metal clamp.

"You," he said, pointing his index finger at me, "can stay longer, but I won't." Now, Doug

might have been a bit negative at work sometimes, but I never heard him revert back to childhood quite like that.

"Okay, Doug, I know that we've had relatively short shifts lately, but sometimes we just have to do what we have to do... to get the job done. Now, if you can't help me I need to find out from David where the priorities are so we can knock something off the list. I can't physically do all of it by myself in one day."

"Well," he said, "good luck, because I'm not even going to stay another minute working with you."

"Whoa, Doug. What is the problem?" I asked.

"I don't like you," he said.

Now, all I could think about was how many people I'd worked with over the years, and how many of them I didn't like, but I worked with them anyway. You have to make the best of your situation. I wanted to tell him to get over himself, to quit crying and move on, but I didn't. It wouldn't have made much of a difference, anyway, because that was the end of Doug's employment at Su Vino. He walked off the job while David was out of the office, and later told David it was because of me. Call me uninventive, but I had no idea how to tell David that his father-in-law just wasn't the right man for the job, so I just ignored it. I should have said something the day after it happened, but I didn't. In fact, David didn't say anything about it, either, so I figured he just understood.

"Are we going to talk about what happened the other day with Doug?" David asked. This was two days after Doug's big exit.

What I wanted to say was, "I don't have any respect for someone who walks out in the middle of a shift," but what I said was, "I really don't know what is going on with Doug, but I

don't think he really wants to quit. Maybe we should just see how he feels in a couple days." I was hoping that sympathizing with Doug would help my case.

"He says you're really bossy," he said. I've got to hand it to him, he's a straight shooter.

"Well, I think part of the problem is that nobody was put in charge except for Bob, so when he's not here I feel like somebody has to organize our weekly tasks into manageable, daily chunks. When nobody is designated as the organizer, the others are bound to feel resentful. And, I'm sorry, but I have a hard time respecting someone who walks off the job in the middle of the shift." Oooh, I said it, and I just kept letting it fly out of my mouth. "I did all of that work by myself yesterday, and it was already too much for the two of us, but I stayed and made sure it got done."

"I agree. He shouldn't have left like that, and I don't agree with it," he said.

"It's hard to work with someone who is a part of your family, because I can't say anything about his performance to you, but I have been doing most of the labor, too. I mean, do you have a problem with the way I do my job? I guess that's what it comes down to," I said. I wanted to stop a rant that snowballed horribly, desperately fighting back tears which are the unfortunate side-effect of my anger and frustration.

"Yeah, I think the physical part of the job was too much for him anyway, but be gentle with whoever we hire. I like you. I just want to make sure this doesn't become a trend," he said.

A trend is exactly what it was, unfortunately. A wake up call in high school clued me in but did not do much in the way of preventing it from happening in the future. I was captain of our high school dance team, and after a long, hot day of practice the officers nodded towards the director. I could tell they all knew something I didn't as they circled up and waited for the director to tell me why we were all gathered.

"Shannon, the girls wanted to talk to you for a few minutes," she said. She looked like she was about to break up with me.

"Okay," I said. My heart pounded with anxiety.

"We think you're too bossy," my co-captain said.

"Really? Is that how everyone feels?" I asked. I teared up immediately. Back then, I cried at the slightest sign of confrontation.

"It just seems like you stand up front all day and we don't ever get a chance to do anything," another girl said.

"Yeah, totally," another said.

"I think what we need to focus on is what we can do better," the director said. "Maybe you could let the girls take turns watching the team practice so they feel included."

"Okay, I had no idea you felt like that. It's just, this is the only way I know how to be the leader of this team. If I would have known there was a problem before... now, it would have been nice," I said.

Criticism is still hard to take, but in high school it was a jab in the side with a sharp, pointy stick and I was even more defensive back then. It felt like my creativity with the dance team went down the drain after that talk, because I was always second-guessing the way I taught dances or how hard I was on them. Admittedly, a confrontation by people I work with should not affect me so drastically that it breaks my spirit, but that's what happens. My longing to please the people around me results in total devastation when it is brought to my attention that I am doing the opposite. The best advice I never took was, "You can't please everyone," because I have delusions of grandeur. I am Superwoman, endowed with special talents that are only mine.

When Doug made his grand display, his stand against all that was evil (me), I was a bit

confused. After all, he'd been an adult for a long-time, while I still considered myself immature. I knew he wasn't happy I was excelling at a quick rate at the winery, but then again, he wasn't staying up all night, doing research in his free time. Doug wasn't concerned about efficiency or the proper way to do things, the sheer tediousness of rinsing, cleaning, sanitizing, rinsing, cleaning, and sanitizing. That talk with the dance team girls and the talk with David were equally embarrassing, but I was supposed to be an adult now. If you ever want to be put in your place, have your boss tell you that you need an attitude adjustment.

Post-Doug, I was there five days per week, doing a job that used to require three people, and I continued this for several months. David didn't give me any positive or negative feedback, and he didn't come into the fermentation or tank rooms much when I was working. Autonomy is great, but I lacked guidance. If I hadn't been diligent in researching the process on my own time, I would have had to quit for lack of training. Did they really think someone could just come in and wing this? Bitterness was setting in, and I had to constantly remind myself how lucky I was to have this job.

Bob came in and did his usual, but mostly he just irritated me by taking all the credit for my work. Still, being a professional winemaker was not something I was going to give up because some old man got on my nerves.

"Hello, I'm Bob," he said. He shook their hands and let them taste wine from the tanks. "I'm the chief winemaker here at Su Vino."

"Really?" they asked.

Swallowing it all down, I stood teetering on a ladder with a five-gallon bag of must or scrubbed the tank room floors with a mop. My jealousy was threatening to spoil my good mood at work, and I started to get nervous each morning when I woke up, worried it would be a Bob

day. Bob and David never introduced me as a winemaker, or even an assistant. I was invisible, but then I figured it wasn't them at all, but my paranoia.

Maybe it was about reverse-discrimination, that I was partial to female bosses. I thought about all the bosses I had over the years, and realized I have only had two. One was at a retail store that sold women's swimwear and the other was at a child care facility. I had to laugh at the thought of it. Was there no way to break this cycle? The only women who had been owner/operators were holding jobs indicative of women. Sure, living in Texas had something to do with the lack of progress. You can't be part of the good-ole-boy network if you're not, well, a good, old, man.

There was more to it than that, though. In fact, my own attitude led to the way I was talked to. My own insecurities about being a winemaker, about taking on a job that I had only read about, about telling my boss I was confident in my abilities, my lying through my teeth, it all contributed to the way I came across. I looked like a brat to Bob, I'm sure, with the air of entitlement I had, but it's the only way I know to Portray myself as capable and confident. When you act the part, people accept your role as a leader, I remembered from one of the business books I read, long before.

My first jobs were for corporate entities, and performance reviews were built in. They were part of the structure and I was conditioned to believe that if you excelled at the thing you were hired to do, you received quarterly or annual pay increases. They might only have been fifty cents here and there, but it was never about the money. Instead, it meant you were doing great work, to give you something to be proud of, or at the very least keep you interested. At Su Vino, you have to ask for what you want, and after I realized that, I didn't feel so injured by not having the feedback. Performance reviews weren't a part of our procedure because we didn't pay a bunch

of schmoes in a corporate office to sit around and come up with incentive structures.

In the end, I realized Bob really just didn't know the answers to those questions he wouldn't answer, because like me, he was winging it. He only came in once every other week or so after the first few months, but I needed to talk with him about the process on a daily basis. Instead, I decided to stop being codependent and start making the executive decisions about the wine myself. Audacious as it was, it was necessary, and I knew that if I kept asking permission for everything, we would never complete a decent batch of wine. Sometimes, the wine would just sit too long in any given step because Bob wasn't there often enough, and he refused to let me do certain steps in the process, making the wine (and me) dependent on his flippant schedule. I was continually annoyed by the fact that he didn't give me any credit for what I was doing. Yet, when he spoke with David, he always tooted his own horn.

"Yeah, we're gonna have a really great wine on our hands with this Cab Franc," Bob said. I overheard him as I was walking out of the tank room. The specific gravity of the wine he was talking about showed it was actually a bit sweeter than the suggested sugar level for that blend. It appeared to me to be a stuck fermentation, but I kept my mouth shut.

"That's great. We need a good one," David said. He spoke to Bob differently than he did with me, but I don't think he even realized it. When I think of their conversations now, I can almost picture them ending in an actual pat on the back, good-ole-boy style, even though I know they didn't actually pat or hug. It was all in the tone.

David is a no-bullshit guy, and I knew I had to make great wine to get his attention. I had to be confident and act as the recognized expert while maintaining a positive attitude, because nobody likes a cynical bitch, but it was difficult to know where to start. I wasn't confident, and although it was getting easier, I still had trouble answering questions when David asked, afraid I

wouldn't sound knowledgeable enough. He must have thought I was a blubbering idiot at times.

My mind had to wrap around the fact that David is a businessman, not a winemaker, so he could care less whether it's Bob or me who fixes a stuck fermentation. David wants to know what our yield is and when it will be ready to sell, and why shouldn't he? That's the bottom line, revenue and profit. I took a page from Bob and began giving David a daily breakdown at the end of each day. A short, casual conversation on the way out, the breakdown keeps David in the loop on everything I'm doing. This way, he's not in the dark, so he leaves me to my business. He trusts me.

"We need more chocolate liquor for the Porto Cocoa, and we will have a tank of Samba coming up next Tuesday, so we're going to need labels for that. What is your priority on tanks?" I asked.

"Let's do the Malbec, first, and then the Merlot. I'll put in an order in to Paradise Liquor and I'll get the labels taken care of," David said.

"Great! What else do you have for us? Anything?"

"I think that's it." Always a similar conversation, short but thorough, and without erroneous small talk. I felt like he appreciated me for being straight-forward and dependable. At least, those were the qualities I hoped he appreciated, because that's all I really had going for me.

With bullies like Bob, the first thing that usually happens is an attempt at leveling the playing field. The bully feels threatened, either psychologically or physically, and they act on it by trying to strike first. It didn't look good for Bob that I managed to handle the entire workload in his absence, and that I was doing it well. Bob had to know it was just a matter of time before David took notice of the fact that he had been rendered obsolete, and I could smell his jealousy a mile away.

"There's no need to run yourself down with all the work," Bob said one day. For a second, I thought he seemed genuinely apologetic for putting it all on me. He had that you-look-unhappy sympathy on his face, and it was right then that I realized what he was trying to pull. It was the old, get-her-to-do-less-so-she-won't-show-me-up routine. Poor Bob... no clue I'd been through this before and even then I could spot it a mile away. My suspicious nature lent itself well to spotting this kind of behavior.

Bob came into the winery a few hours after the rest of us one day and began delegating tasks. Normally, he was very respectful when he did this, but this time he barked orders. I may be great at barking them myself, but when someone else does it, I'm all offended. This particular time, I was in the middle of the large task I'd been working on since we started that morning, and was still not finished with it.

"I'm actually busy with these stirs right now, but if you want to leave me a list I'll get it taken care of," I said.

"We-hell," he said. The word came out with a chuckle in the middle. "We need to take a look at this stuff while I'm here." He did not like my attitude, and I could tell by the way he held a surprised look in his eye, a long stare for added drama.

"That's fine, but The Bottlers and I have been here all morning and we are all absorbed in important tasks that can't be stopped in the middle easily, so I think it would be better if you could let me know in advance when you'll be dropping in so I can plan for it."

I knew what I sounded like, but this brat was through allowing this egotistical old man to run all over her. At this point in our relationship, I had seen little to convince me he even cared much about the finished product. It was a status symbol for him, and while I do like that part of the job title, it would be impossible to do the job without a passion for the grapes and what we

make from them.

"I'm here now, and I don't have a lot of time today," he said.

"You're never here. Quite frankly, I'm doing your job and mine, so it's pretty difficult for me to just drop what I'm doing for ya," I said. That's where I went too far.

"Well, I'm still the chief winemaker," he said. I pictured him doing a little head-bob and turning on his heel when I heard his tone.

A few weeks later, Bob asked me how I was doing with the workload. I told him it was hard work, but that I was getting it done. The goal was to get him to come in and help me, to earn his part of the bargain, but instead he used it as a way to get me to ask David to hire another person. If I admitted to David I needed the help, that I couldn't do the job, I thought I would appear weak, and Bob wouldn't look like such a schmuck for allowing himself to be rendered obsolete.

"You know, if you don't ask for help now, you may never get it," he said.

"I need the hours and we would only be able to use someone else a couple days, about ten to twelve hours per week. So, I will continue to work the extra hours until David increases my workload. When he does that, I'll feel justified in hiring someone else," I said.

"If that's what you wanna do-hoo."

I did need a break, a big one. I was fatigued from the physical part of the job and I was emotionally drained from the anxiety that was involved in wondering whether Bob would be there that day, and what I would be roped into that I hadn't planned for. When it was just me, I could plan my whole week around my schedule at school. Large tasks were done when I had nothing but time and I worked shorter days on the nights I had school responsibilities.

Bob came in and did things like start three tanks at once, leaving me to do all the work to

maintain them in the following weeks. As I said, starting them is the easy part, but working three tanks of red wine at once takes a lot of time and energy. Eventually, I started coming to work in jeans and T-shirts, instead of slacks and nice blouses, because I knew I would get a wine shower, or have to wade through something or other. Make-up went to the way-side altogether because it just ran into my eyes when I got wet, so I looked as fatigued as I was.

My first hiatus from the winery happened during spring break of 2009, when David agreed I could have the week off. My friends were renting a beach house and I couldn't wait to stop running lists of responsibilities through my head at every moment of the day. To be sure the winery didn't miss me while I was away, I did two weeks' worth of work in the week leading up to my vacation. This was going to be a test of how well I could manage my workload before and after time off, and I didn't want to have trouble getting more time off in the future. So, to make it easy on Bob and my nerves, I left him with a very light load.

The weeks leading up to that trip were strenuous and long. When I take time off, preparations have to start a few weeks before, so that none of the batches will need me while I am away. Some of the steps in the process must be done right on time, or the batches will fail, and in the first few weeks, they need me most. I was at the winery until after dark several nights in a row, but managed to get the work done. Finally, it was my last shift, on a sunny, Thursday afternoon. I cleaned and sanitized buckets as I allowed myself a daydream about the coming week with friends on the beach. Just as I was about to pick up my imaginary beer, I sprayed myself in the face with water by accident and it snapped me into reality.

Lifting, stirring, heaving, I filled buckets with must and filtered water and put them onto the fermentation shelf in my wine making lair at Su Vino. Humming to the music playing throughout the winery as I worked made the time fly by. The 80's station was on and I was just grateful it wasn't country music. David is from California, but he loves crappy country music. Cyndi Lauper and Prince helped me through the last few lifts, my back straining all the way, crumpled and aching from the wear and tear of being a winemaker. Before I knew it, it was time to start cleaning up. The buckets sat on the shelf, ready to be inoculated with yeast, a process I like to call introducing the Yeastie Boys, a reference to one of my favorite rap groups. Disturbance is caused by moving the buckets onto the shelf, so I like to wait until the liquid is still before inoculation. While I waited I began sanitizing and rinsing the utensils, one by one.

I was proud of the work I had accomplished that week, and allowed myself to stray, making a mental list of what I had left to pack and prep for my trip: shorts, socks, wine, and phone charger. Staring at the cart, I noticed wine pools from a task I did earlier, so I got to work on them with a damp towel when I remembered, "I have to get the Yeastie Boys in those batches." Magic happens when yeast is introduced, along with the bentonite powder which is stirred into the must before inoculation. They help each other. As yeast become active, they release carbon dioxide in the form of carbon dioxide bubbles. Those bubbles move the bentonite around and through the liquid, picking up and moving yeast throughout the batch. Paired together, they eliminate the need for human and spoon throughout the fermentation process. However, without yeast, the bentonite just sinks to the bottom.

Searching for my scissors, to cut open the yeast packets, I saw David walk in. He started in, asking me when the Malbec would be ready to drink. When I checked the Malbec shelf, I was a little out of breath, since I had been racing to complete my tasks so I could get the hell out of

there.

“I don’t think it’s going to be ready, but we can taste it if you want,” I said. David often releases wine too early, because our wine sells quickly and he likes to keep the shelves full. This time, though, we agreed it wasn’t worth opening yet, and I went back to my station. “Now, what was I doing? Mop!” I filled the mop bucket with scalding-hot water and watched the steam rise, which made me think of a hot shower, and inevitably I was back to daydreaming about the beach and, “Oh, I wonder if there’s an outdoor shower there,” and, “I’m going to shower outside, no matter if there is a partition or not. I don’t care if it’s fifty degrees.” Too much water in the mop bucket, but oh well. I slid the mop across the floor and heaved the heavy bucket over the sink to empty it before taking the trash out the door with me on my way out, and “I’m free!” Out of character as it was, I didn’t have a single thought about the winery until I walked back in a week later.

“How was your trip?” Bob asked.

“It was fantastic! How are you doing?” I asked. I felt gracious and light after the long break, so I wasn’t upset in the least to see Bob. It actually made me feel good that he was there to check up on things while I was gone so that I could relax.

“Well, I have something I need to talk to you about,” he said. Bob had this tone, like the one my dad used when he felt sorry for me, right before he told me something devastating, the, *this-is-terrible-for-you-and-I-wish-I-didn’t-have-to-tell-you* face.

“We didn’t want to spoil your trip, so we waited to tell you,” he said. David knew about whatever it was he was talking about, and then, “Blah, blah, blah.”

“Oh no,” I said. “What happened?”

“Well, I came in on Sunday to check things out and when I walked back here, by the

fermentation shelf, and I noticed all these little yeast packets, just sitting on top of the buckets,” he said.

My heart dropped. That's when I remembered leaving without cutting open those little packets to release the Yeasties. Hurry, I thought, be devastated at your mistake. Show remorse!

“Oh my gosh,” I said. “No, I did NOT forget to do that.”

“Yeah, and that’s not all,” he said.

“Oh, God, what?” That's when the hot chills broke out and I thought I might vomit because I felt this was a terminable offense already.

“There were a couple of batches that had elderflower in them, right? The mango one?” he asked. He knew it was the mango one we used elderflower with, so he was really digging in now.

“Yeah,” I said. I squinted, readying myself for the blow.

“We-hell,” there’s the chuckle, “they grew spikes and they’re three times their original size.”

“What? They grew mold? How?” I didn’t understand how that was possible.

“Did you sanitize the elderflower?” he asked.

“Of course!”

I walked into David’s office with my head held low. Not only was I worried about my job, but Bob scored big points when he swooped in to save the day. My brow was drenched and dripping with sweat as I waited for him to get off the phone. Then, I said it before he could.

“I heard about what happened this past week with the starts, and I just want you to know that I am very, very sorry. It was a stupid mistake, and I understand if you need to take action here,” I said.

I was going to be fired, no doubt in my mind. Besides, I felt horrible because David had

put complete confidence in me, and now he had good reason to doubt me. It seemed like a very long time before he spoke, the dread of the principal's office all the way. In those long seconds, I thought about the first time my parents were really disappointed in me, and I was angry with myself in the same way on both occasions. David looked at me with a blank face before he spoke.

“Everybody makes mistakes. I bet you won’t make that one again,” he said.

“I totally understand if you don’t want me in production anymore,” I said. I wasn't sure what the terms were.

“It’s okay,” he said. Somehow, I knew that he was going to be understanding, that he was on my side, and I knew I must have been doing something right for him to forgive me so readily. I made a big mistake, I wouldn’t make it again, just like he said. Even though we learn from our mistakes, it still sucks to make them, and it's nice to know someone will give you a, “Do-better-next-time,” instead of a, “You're-fired,” when you do.

Regardless of how it happened, the wine was stuck, and I thought I was going to save the day. The night before, I'd been up for hours, into the morning, researching stuck fermentations and gathering advice on how to fix them. I told Bob I wanted to try the fix this time, and just then David came around the corner.

"We-hell, I guess we could try," Bob said. He laughed at me in one of those, 'It's not going to work, but...' laughs. He ended up skimming the information I printed out for him and pitching in new yeast, but the instructions specifically said to rack it off the old yeast first. Naturally, the

fix did not work, and Bob got to be right again, but I knew I could have done it. We were left with no change in the specific gravity and with a tank of sweet Chardonnay.

Bob came up with a brilliant idea to turn the batch into an apple pie wine, and it sold wonderfully. Since David didn't lose money on the spoiled batch, he was happy. Now, I'm forever stuck making the damned apple pie wine every Christmas. Bob continued coming in to do all the fun parts of the job after that. Then, he would leave for a week or two while I did all the grunt work, the physically exhausting work, the clean-up. Redemption finally came the next time Bob started a white wine batch.

After the botched Chardonnay, we needed a dry white wine. We were running out of them and had nothing aging. We started a tank of special edition grape juice, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc and Chenin Blanc. The tasty juice was going to turn out delicious, and I could hardly contain myself before I checked the specific gravity a few days into it. Fermentation seemed to be moving right along until day 6, and then it came to a screeching halt. It was stuck. I waited a week and a half before I said anything, thinking it may spring back to life after I stirred it back up. Nothing. Stuck.

Bob was going to be out until at least the next week, and I knew this was my opportunity to attempt a fix on a stuck fermentation without having to subjugate myself to Bob. In fact, I began the process without telling David at all. In the back of my mind, I was hoping David would realize I didn't really need Bob at all, that I had been doing all the work for months and had a handle on it. So, I began racking, and grinding and pitching before anyone was the wiser. Then, when I was finished, I told David it was stuck.

"We have a stuck fermentation in the special edition tank," I said. "I knew Bob wouldn't be back for a while so I went ahead and attempted a fix. I have already handled it, and I really

think I can get this thing kick-started again." I had no idea if it would work, but I had to be the winemaker he needed, even if it felt like a ruse. "It's pretty bad, but I know what was done wrong when the Chardonnay was stuck, and this time I made sure it was done correctly."

He seemed indifferent about what I had done. In any case, he wasn't angry with me for doing it, and that was a step in the right direction. So, I waited, anxiety eating away at my soul, for 4 days over the weekend before I opened the tank and checked the S.G. It was drier! In fact, it was a whole 5 points drier, and it was bubbling again. I stretched a sigh out for minutes, it seemed, before I realized I had been holding my breath the whole time I was reading the hydrometer. Two days later, the batch was completely fermented, but I didn't tell David about it until Bob came in the next day. I wanted to tell them together.

"So," I said. "Guess what?"

"What?" Bob asked. He was about to take a sample from the trio Blanca tank.

"This tank was so stuck, it didn't move for days," I said. Then, I winked at David, who was standing at a nearby display case. He knew immediately that it was fixed, and he chuckled a little. I imagined he was relieved.

"You're kidding me," Bob said. "We've got another one, huh?"

"We DID have another one," I said, "but I fixed it!"

"You did? That's great," he said.

"I did, and do you know what? I realized there was a very important part of the process we left out last time." This was where all the returns rolled in, at this very moment. "We have to rack the wine off the lees to fix a stuck fermentation, because the new yeast cells mimic the lazy cells that are already there. Did you know that?"

"I didn't," he said.

He smiled and gave me the, 'okay, you win,' look, and then he went about his day, acting busy with other, much more important things. All I needed was that look. A nod of respect, as little as it may have been, was what I needed to feel good about what I was doing. I wanted them to know and admit that I could do it, despite my lack of experience and despite the fact that I was a young woman. Bob never would have consented to letting me do the fix without him, but it was done and David knew I could do it.

When my workload increased, we did decide to hire another assistant to help me out. At that point and time, Trent was one of The Bottlers, but he hadn't been working there very long. From his first day at the winery, he was curious about the process, so did seem to be the only logical choice for an assistant winemaker. Curiosity is a strong trait to have when you are going into a new field of expertise, to want to learn because you are genuinely interested.

Ready to give Trent a shot, I told David I thought he had the potential to be a great assistant. David agreed and we decided to tell him the good news the next day. By the time I arrived the next day, Bob was there and David had already filled him in. Immediately, we were sitting around debating whether Trent would make a good assistant.

“David, you need to get someone in here who isn't a student, and who can be here whenever you need them to be,” Bob said.

“I take offense to that, because I am a student and I am here all the time. In fact, I do most of the production these days,” I said. Bob didn't like it when I said things like that in front of David.

“Students graduate and they leave. You need someone in here that will take it seriously,” he said.

“I take this very seriously, and I guarantee you I am not leaving unless David asks me to,” I said. I looked straight into Bob's eyes without blinking as I said it. David would know I was a little bit feisty, but it was better than having no voice at all. “Besides, I thought Pauline was talking about you guys moving to Florida the other day, so I guess anyone could move away.”

Trent called out from the bottling station about something, and I left the table to help him, grateful for the interruption.

“Hey, I just want you to know that I am doing my best to get you on as my assistant,” I said. I suspected Bob would take all the credit for getting him the promotion, and I wanted him to know I was the one pulling for him.

“Really? Thanks, Shannon. I really appreciate that,” he said.

“No problem. I think David's going for it, but Bob's got some questions. I know you dabble in winemaking at home, and I know you are curious and eager. To me, that's all it takes to have the potential to be a good winemaker,” I said. I meant every word of it. He seemed like the best candidate for the job.

When I got back to the table, they had decided to go ahead and give Trent the job, so I was finally going to get some help. The training period would be long and thorough. My main concern was not to put him in the position I was in, where I had to teach myself how to do everything by trial and error. I wanted him to feel we were setting him up for success, so I made it my personal goal, right there at that table, to nurture him in the position until he had it down. Bob walked over to Trent and held out his hand as he offered him the job, officially.

“I hope you're ready for this, Trent,” he said.

"Yessir," Trent said. He looked at me and smiled, and I knew we were going to make a great team.

That was about the same time I started hearing Bob talk openly about moving to Florida. Whether it was a solid plan before that, I do not know, but Bob did have that pride problem. He would move a few states away to make it valid for him to leave the winery, I thought.

When I started training Trent, he made understand how annoying it must have been for Bob when I asked him all those questions. At least he was interested enough about the wine to ask them, though, and he did his own nightly research on my suggestion. You can't expect that from someone who isn't genuinely interested in what they are doing, and I applauded his study habits. Sometimes, when he asked me a question I didn't know, I would say, "Why don't you research that tonight and tell me about it tomorrow?" I couldn't have been happier about my new assistant. It takes twice as long to complete any given task when you're training someone, but it pays off later, and Trent always took my advice, something Doug refused to do, instead spending hours devising a new tool for the task or figuring out a better way.

Once, Trent tasted a glass of Zinfandel and told me it was too oaky. I poured a bit for myself and tasted it, failing to taste much oak at all.

"It's oaky, alright," he said.

"It may be a bit tannic, but not so much oaky. I actually think it could use a little more oak, to tell you the truth," I said.

"Really?"

"Come back to the fermentation room," I said.

My idea was to help him understand the difference between the flavors in question, mainly because you have to know what oak tastes like in order to make a decision about when to

add more or stop oak aging entirely. What better way to distinguish between them than to break them down to their individual properties? So, I poured two cups 1/4 full of warm water. I added a bit of oak powder to one and a little tannin powder to the other.

These supplies can be handy, like when someone requests a private batch of Merlot, but under the *special requests* heading, it says, "more tannic, like Cabernet Franc/Merlot." Why not just order a batch of Cabernet Franc/Merlot? I cannot tell you the methods behind the madness, but it turns out that adding tannin powder to Merlot actually does make a nicer wine than our Cabernet Franc/Merlot. The truth is, oak powder is a pain in the butt, and I only used the tannin powder the one time, until my little experiment with Trent.

"Okay, taste these and tell me what you think," I said.

"That... looks appetizing," he said.

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry it's kind of weird, but I really think you will gain a lot from this experience. I'll try them, too, if it will make you feel better."

"No, that's okay. Here goes," he said. He took a swish of each, and after he spit the second one out, "Oh! Okay, I got it."

For someone to go with an experiment like that, and not question it, is true trust. I needed Trent to trust that I knew what I was doing in order for him to follow my lead, and he did. That is why we started out as such a strong team. I'm not sure I ever got that trust from Doug, which is probably why he couldn't take my methods at face value. Bob didn't trust that I knew what I was doing, either, and I knew that after he refused to let me fix that tank of Chardonnay. Investing a little confidence in an employee can instill self-confidence in them, and I wanted to do that for Trent.

Weeks before Pauline and Bob moved to Florida, Bob stopped coming in altogether.

Pauline had a little going-away party. I was genuinely sorry to see her go, even though she was a tough and critical woman, I would miss her spunk and independence. It seemed she knew what she was doing when she married Bob. He was rich and out of town most of the time, so she got him in small doses. If Bob and I had met outside of our little wine world, we still would not have gotten along. Grapevine's upper crust doesn't mingle with college-town hippie kids. Bob never said goodbye, but I knew why.

He had a tumor in his brain and nobody knew it, not even him. His M.C. Hammer-pants and mellow disposition were obvious, but the whole time something sinister lurked in his brain. I definitely sensed something was wrong when he came in with a huge wound on his delicate, bald forehead, but I guessed older people just fell down sometimes. 'Hammer-pants' had a day-job as a merchandiser for a large department store, but he came in to help The Bottlers on Mondays as a side gig with his wife. She sold cheesecakes at large winery events and had a home-catering business. It wasn't long after the day he came in with that head-wound that we found out he had cancer. Within a couple of weeks, he was just gone. For a whole month, I didn't see his lovely wife, but when I did, all I could do was ask how she was and tell her I was happy to see her. I'm not great in these situations. Nothing I could say would do her much good.

"The wine is tasting so good these days," she said.

"Aw, thank you. That's good to hear," I said. She took the time to compliment my work, even though she was in hell, and I couldn't even muster up something sympathetic to say. Maybe I need to hone my people skills, I thought.

"I'm sorry you're having to go through this," I said. Then, I gave her a half-hug and a pat, like that was going to help, but what can I say? I'm a hugger.

We still saw her at big events for a short time, but she no longer came in to help The Bottlers on Mondays. Pauline was gone, too, so we needed to get some new people in there to help out. That's when big Reuben came into the picture. We hired him because he was a nice guy, he had a second job and he was big. Heavy-lifting was killing my back, and we have a lot of it at the winery, so we needed muscle. Reuben was a bartender, then a bail bondsman while he worked for us. His demeanor was jolly, but he was so reckless at work. Reuben regularly talked loudly about smoking pot and partying without any concern about David being within earshot, and I don't know why it bothered me so much, but I cringed every time. Everyone has their vices on their free time; Don't get me wrong. Do they need to be discussed at the workplace? I think not.

Regardless, that wasn't what sent him packing. Reuben eventually stopped showing up, a rarity at the winery. Most people love the job. The great part about Reuben was that he referred one of the best employees I have ever had, Chris Darden. This guy was the friendliest man you could ever meet, and he stuck around long after Reuben left. He was quirky; once, he told me he could only study in the bathroom with the hot water running on full-blast, but he would do anything we needed him to do, and he did it with a smile. With all of the new employees came training sessions, and a lot of them. Most of The Bottlers understood clearly what had to be done, but my assistant Trent asked questions over and over again. It seemed he still wasn't catching on, or wasn't comfortable with things. Maybe I made it difficult for him to be confident, because I had such rigid guidelines and high expectations. I wanted all of our wine to hold up to the same standards, but I had a feeling I may not be as great a trainer as I thought.

"So, which ones do we stir?" he asked. It was his seventh week, and he asked me that question every time we did stirs.

"Okay, let me show you how to figure this out for yourself. See, you depend on me to show you every week, but what if I'm not here?" I asked. Making an effort not to sound as frustrated as I was, I stressed the importance of learning the way.

"I mean, I think I can figure it out, but I don't want to mess anything up," he said. He was holding his palms up, like he was on the defensive already, and that made me even more annoyed.

"Look, it's just a good idea for you to be able to go up to any batch in this room and tell me what needs to be done to it next. I have everything clearly labeled and documented right there on the batch tags," I said. The batch tags always hung conveniently, by rubber bands, from the neck of each six-gallon carboy.

"I know, but you know exactly which ones we're doing," he said. He did his best to rationalize the question, but he didn't understand that I knew why he asked. It was easier to ask me than to go and figure it out.

"Okay, come here," I said. I took a moment to take a deep breath and calm myself before speaking. "Do you see, here, where I put a check mark next to the steps that have been completed?"

"Yes, I know," he said.

"And then, they are dated also, so you know that if something has not yet been stirred, like these, you would look at the date they were started. If it has been five to seven days, you take the S.G. If the specific gravity reading is within the appropriate range, you rack it and stir it, right?" I asked.

"Well, ya, but," he said.

"I know that I know which ones need to be done, but I want to know that you know which ones need to be done. So, which ones need to be done?" I asked.

He finally did the legwork and confirmed his results with me. From then on, I expected he wouldn't ask that particular question again. The problem was I was worried our conversation would damage the friendly working dynamic we had. I knew I was being condescending, and I couldn't figure out how else to say the words I needed to impress upon him how important it was to learn how to do the easy things on his own. My assistant was taking more of my time than the job was, but I was going to have to grin and bear it. After all, I was the one who pushed for him to move up, and I was going to have to make it work.

The light in my day came from Chris Darden, because he always found a way to break any tension that existed and make everyone laugh. We didn't have a dress code and everyone knew it was a possibility they would get wine on their clothes, so most of The Bottlers wore jeans and T-shirts to work, but not Chris Darden. He wore polos and starched button-ups with his ostrich boots and nice jeans. David loved Chris, too. When I saw them talking and laughing, I was kind of jealous because it had taken David a long time to warm up to me. In fact, the only things David and I talked about for the first year and a half was wine, my attitude and whatever fun facts we could come up with about the songs we heard. The main thing about Chris was that he was easy to talk to, and he was a quick learner.

Before I knew it, Chris was helping me with tank starts, lugging bladders of must up the ladder for me and dumping them in. Any time I needed help with anything, or when we needed to work late nights occasionally, Chris was there to help. In the short year we had him around, he learned almost everything there was to know about starting batches and bottling them, two large

steps in the production process. I even felt comfortable leaving him to do a few small starts if I had to take a day off.

When Reuben stopped showing up, Chris told David about a guy he used to work with by the name of Tomohiro. David hired him, and I met him for the first time one Monday morning, before I'd heard anything about it.

"Hello! I'm Shannon," I said. Surprised to see a stranger before we were open, I shook his hand and waited for him to tell me what he was doing there.

"Hi, I'm Tomo," he said.

"To-?"

"Toh-Moh," he said.

"Okay, it's nice to meet you, Tomo. Did you talk to David, or?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm Chris's friend," he said. He assumed I knew what was going on and I couldn't blame him for that.

After we all got on the same page, I started training him on how to do a few easy things. I had a lot to do that day, and I hadn't allowed any training time.

"I am probably just going to have you wash bottles for the first day. I know it isn't glamorous or anything, but it is an extremely important step in the process. If the bottles are not properly sanitized and rinsed, the wine will be bad," I said.

"Okay, that's cool," he said.

"Hey, Shannon," Chris said from across the bottling station. "I could train Tomo, if you want me to."

"Okay," I said. Chris was very good at his job, and fast, too. He would set a great standard for Tomo, and I trusted him to be thorough. "Let me know if you have any questions, Tomo."

"Thanks," Tomo said. He was half-listening as he disappeared into the back room, probably for more bottles, I thought.

The problem was that Tomo began disappearing into the back room a lot. In fact, by the time we let him go, he was spending more time back there than he was up front. Where Chris could get three carboys bottled and labeled in two hours, Tomo did one. He stopped to eat frequently, a bottomless pit of a guy, and he took phone calls regularly. Sometimes, he just, straight-up, disappeared. When David left the store to run mid-morning errands, Tomo usually slipped out for the day without telling anyone.

Watching him closely while he worked became a regular thing, taking me away from the wine even more. I had the feeling he was taking quite a few shortcuts out of laziness, and it made me feel like I had to Pauline him just to be sure he knew I was watching. Each time he did something incorrectly, I asked him to redo it or fix it. Tomo forced me to micro-manage him, and I really hate that.

"I know this is not easy, but the labels need to be placed in the correct position, or else all of the bottles look different," I said. Then, I demonstrated.

"Okay," he said. His eyes looked like he was tearing up. What do you do if somebody cries at work because of you? I was used to crying, not being cried to.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Fine," he said.

"I'm not trying to be a nag, really. I have just noticed that the labeling has gotten very sloppy lately when I look at the racks. They need to all look the same. I know we are doing everything by hand, but it has to look like they all came out of a machine for consistency, you know?" I asked. Even as I was speaking I knew that I was not helping the situation. "It's not

personal, Tomo. It's just business."

He only nodded, so I decided it was best to walk away from the situation. If I couldn't talk to my employees about doing things correctly, what kind of production can I get out of them? Am I that much of a bitch, or is there something seriously wrong with this guy? I asked myself these questions but didn't have an answer. Ultimately, I asked Chris.

"Is anything wrong with Tomo these days? It seems like I have to walk on eggshells around him," I said.

"It's weird. He never used to be like this when we worked together before. You shouldn't apologize. Just tell him what needs to be done and that's it. You always apologize for things you shouldn't," he said. Chris was honest and I liked it.

"You're right, but I figured maybe I sounded bitchy or something, because I swear he looked really upset, so my first thought was to soften what I said."

Chris talked to Tomo about his work performance, because he felt the same way I did about referring friends: They can make or break you at work, so you better be sure about them and keep them in check.

"I talked to him about it, and I think he's depressed or something," Chris said.

"Well, why is he so down?" I asked.

"I think it's because he's been trying to break up with his girlfriend for a couple months, now, and she keeps making it impossible."

"Well, I know all about that, but you have to end it if it's making you depressed. I was dating a guy about three years longer than I should have, in fact. I was in a state of such depression, my doctor at the student health center wanted to get me government funding for anti-depressants. She seemed heart-broken when I told her I didn't want to medicate the problem, but

it turned out all I had to do was break up with the guy. I was instantly cured, dude. It was crazy."

"Yeah, that stuff can make you crazy," he said. Chris was a great listener, and just as I was thinking of promoting him to be an assistant winemaker, he said, "So, you know I'm graduating in a few weeks?"

"Yes! I am so excited for you," I said.

"I think I'm moving back to Odessa."

"No! You can't leave us. Seriously?" But he was leaving, and I was going to have to find a new crew again. I was really going to miss Chris. In the short amount of time he was there, he brightened the workplace and became a friend of ours.

"We're really going to miss you, man," I said. "But, congratulations."

Then, I hugged our best employee good-bye. Everyone still misses him at Su Vino, and Tomo broke that girl's heart, but not before we had to let him go for poor job performance. Once in a while, Facebook reminds me about Chris Darden, and it lets me know how he's doing.

When it comes to work, expertise is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and when you master a job, you've conquered. In the past, I learned a set of steps and executed them many times, until I found ways to improve the existing system. Wine making is not like this, and neither is writing, so I find myself in the other realm. Uncertainty makes my neck and back tighten. Wrinkles between my eyebrows are permanently crinkled. Without this constant anxiety, I would cease to be enamored. Bittersweet is the end of this rainbow, because expertise in this field comes with the sorrow of knowing there is nothing more to discover about the fruit I hold

close. It is the rainbow, and not the pot of gold, that makes me want to continue making wine, and to write. My learning experiences at Su Vino are what make the story, not the wine, and I will learn more about myself by documenting my experiences. Wine is unpredictable. To continually yield identical batches is true expertise. It is not simply a matter of mastering Cabernet Sauvignon or Malbec, for example, because every batch of must and juice is a little bit different, in sweetness, or tannins or acidity, or any number of little things that make up the whole.

It's easier than you might guess to muck it up. If the wine gets too hot during fermentation, it could lose quite a bit of flavor. If you don't dissolve certain ingredients before you add them, the wine may not ferment properly. If you dissolve others before adding them, your wine also may not ferment. To produce alcoholic grape juice is not difficult. Making it taste great every time is quite another story. The hardest part of the job is the criticism of others in the industry.

After my first year and a half at Su Vino, my boyfriend Brandon and I flew to California, rented a hybrid in Oakland and began our 10-day wine trail down the Pacific Coast Highway, from Napa to Temecula. I handed my business card to each wine server when they greeted us to let them know I was in the industry. David did not let me in on this wonderful part about my job. A nice guy who works at a winery in Lake Tahoe taught me all about the industry discount when Brandon and I were there for a family reunion a few months before. I couldn't believe David had never mentioned it.

"You didn't tell me I could get free tastings everywhere with a business card. The guy in Tahoe gave it to me anyway. He gave me twenty-five percent off any bottles I wanted, too," I said, enthusiastically. "I need some business cards! Can I pay to have them made through you or maybe I could just get the logo and make them myself?"

"Sure," he said. What did that mean? I wasn't going to wait around for him to do it, so I formatted a simple card and ran my flash drive to the nearest Kinko's to get them printed just days before we left for Cali. I'm from there, so I can call it that.

Most of the other winery employees were gracious, asking questions about what varietals we produced and kicking back stories of their own. I avoided, at all costs, the vineyard topic. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Better to remain professional-looking for all the tastings and enjoy the industry discounts. For a while, I felt like a real winemaker. We tried Napa wines and then we drove over to the Winchester Mansion before heading down to Solvang, a cute little Dutch town my parents used to take us to when we were kids. Back then, I had no idea I was surrounded by vineyards and wineries the whole time, and those wines were the most delicious in all of California.

When we got to Temecula, a very hot place to grow grapes, in my opinion, all the friendliness we had encountered went out the window. Where I expected to find snobbishness up in Napa, we were pleasantly surprised, and the people in the Santa Barbara area around Solvang were as delightful as the wines they served us. Some say Temecula wines are the least attractive of California wines, and their climate is the answer why, but the people who work in those wineries are very proud of their wine. One woman asked what varietals we grew... not made, grew, so I decided to admit it right then and there.

"We don't actually have a vineyard. The winery is in North Texas, in Grapevine. There are a ton of mustang grapes out there, but we don't bother making wine out of them. That would not go well," I said.

"Well, what do you do, then?"

"We import our must and juice from all over the world," I said. This was my grandiose

line, and it satisfied our clients in Grapevine.

"So, you just get, what, like juice in a bag or something?"

I wanted to come back with something contradictory, but we did, in fact, receive the must and juice in large, vacuum-sealed bladders.

"Well, it is only juice. We make it into wine, of course," I said.

"That's just the easy part," she said.

She actually turned her nose up towards the ceiling. I gave a forced chuckle and finished my tastings without buying a single bottle. The wines were alright, but not spectacular. They didn't have any distinctive characteristics. Nothing set them apart from any of their neighbors. Maybe they needed to pay more attention to the "easy part" of the process, and the thought of it soothed me.

"That bitch made me question whether I had the right to call myself a winemaker, and that wasn't cool," I said. We were back in the sweltering parking lot.

"Babe, fuck her, okay. Their wine sucked," he said. A true cowboy, Brandon's colorful vernacular pairs perfectly with his long, southern drawl. He had a way of making the things that bothered me seem insignificant, like when I came home from the winery upset with Bob.

"Who is this guy? He's a washed up pilot, okay. He's not going to be back for another two weeks anyway, so just blow him off, Chica." He was right.

My job is back-breaking. To be concerned with what other people think of my job is not in my best interest. I haul large, 6-gallon buckets by my fingertips above my chest and onto fermentation shelves. I lug unruly bladders of must and juice up ladders and pour them into the large tanks, and repeat that several times over. I unload large pallets from semi-trucks in the middle of heat waves, and I do it all without workman's compensation or health insurance. When

I taste the fruits of my labor, it seems all the more delicious for the effort involved in its production, and I don't need vines to do it.

I put winemaker on my business card. Some winemakers' signatures are on the back labels of commercial wine bottles. Sometimes, I imagine David asking me if I would like to sign the label template, but I wonder if I can sign it if I didn't grow the grapes. Can I claim to be the winemaker of a beautiful Super Tuscan if I didn't nurture those grapes while they matured on the vine? I did not sing to them, or rub their leaves, or splice them with other vines until I got the perfect fruit. Growing them for years before I could even make wine out of them is not something I went through. I simply manipulated them.

Ritualistically, I do rub the sides of the tanks to coax fermentation along, and take an active role in the nurturing of the yeast. The fate of the wine hangs in their hungry little hands, or mouths, or whatever the Yeastie Boys use to gobble up the sugar. I long for the wine to come out splendid, and even when it doesn't I use my skills in blending it, or oaking it into balance. Sometimes, in my private batches, I add dried cherries or blueberries to increase the tannins and add complexity to the wine. The flavors explode in your mouth.

One Su Vino customer wanted vanilla and another desired pear essence to be added to their wine. I do whatever they ask. California would disagree with this, saying the notes should be inherent in the grapes. Many things we do in Texas are considered cheating there, like adding sugar or flavoring. Wine can taste like almost anything without additions; leather, citrus, coffee, currant, dirt, list goes on. All of these things are normal to detect in the wine, but I don't see a problem with amplifying my customers' favorite notes, to craft the perfect wine to suit each particular taste.

When I am in my fermentation room at work, or at the little area I have designated as my

home lab, I am a mad scientist. But, while I am throwing in dried fruits or spices to invent new and interesting notes in the wines I make at home, always pushing the envelope of what is considered appropriate, my challenge at the winery is to make consistent batches. In both work spaces I have beakers and hydrometers, and a wine thief (a long, glass cylinder that acts like a straw to draw wine from the bottleneck of the carboy without disturbing the lees at the bottom), but whether I am producing a large batch in a stainless steel tank, or a small batch in a carboy on my kitchen counter, I am very serious about the quality of the finished product.

Cleaners and sanitizers allow my work areas to be cleaned like no other part of my home ever will be. Clear water turns milky as I sprinkle the non-toxic, food-safe cleaner into the bucket. Hot water rushes into the mixture from the faucet over an industrial, white ceramic sink on one side of the fermentation area. I pull out the shiny, plastic hoses and attach them to either end of the filter machine with nut-drivers and good, old-fashioned elbow grease.

All of the tiny dust particles that have settled in the clear, perfect tubes will be washed away and replaced by ruby wine. I watch as the rinses run through, and I am soothed by the humming of the machine... the flow of fluid. Hum. It reminds me of the calm of laying in the back of my mother's station wagon after a long night at the drive-in movie when I was a kid in California. The vibration wooed us to sleep on a pile of blankets in back. Through each step of the winemaking process, I carry that calmness.

We were sisters in a coed fraternity as undergraduates, and Allison was a lot like me. She was strong and capable, reliable and responsible. Anyone who could get through pledging and initiation into that fraternity, and still have the energy to sustain a job or two and class, was

exemplary in my book. I also happened to know she kept her kitchen and the rest of her house very tidy, a bonus. I wish I had thought of her when we hired Trent, but it didn't occur to me. Actually, I never thought of it. I wasn't even talking to Allison when I mentioned to a friend that I was looking for a new assistant. Lucky for me, she was eavesdropping. When she heard I needed help, she approached me immediately and asked me about the specifics of the job.

“I didn’t even think about asking you, because I know you already have two jobs,” I said. She loved wine, but I was worried she would get burned out with all those jobs. I also knew I couldn’t make it worth her while, financially, to quit either of them.

“I only substitute-teach occasionally, and I can always say no. Plus, I would really love to learn how to make wine, and you know I’m dependable,” she said.

“Sold! Come in for an interview on Monday so you can meet David.”

I tried not to get my hopes up, because great intentions are present at parties like the one we were at that night, but the real world comes back when you wake up the next morning. Often it’s a case of the, “what-did-I-agree-to-last-night’s” after the haze clears. Sure enough, though, she called the next day to make sure I was serious, and that it wasn’t some drunken offer I didn’t mean.

“No,” I said. “I was serious. Come in Monday morning.”

I knew it was just a technicality. David would let me have her if I wanted her, and my job was about to become a whole lot better. Some of the best workers are referrals from your best employees, and I knew Allison was going to be great. We already got along outside of work, which meant that she already knew my personality, abrasive as it may be. Plus, there was a good chance she wouldn't double-cross me or try to take my job. My biggest fear is still having my job taken out from under me by someone who comes in and proves me to be dispensable. Allison

was my friend, though, and we could get past all that and down to business.

When she showed up, her long, red hair twisted into perfect buns on either side of her head, she was ready to absorb any and all information I was willing to dish. It was refreshing to have someone as open and dedicated as she. Soon after we hired Allison, the winery became less tense, and I learned quickly how to balance a friend in the work environment. We laughed all day, every day, even when we didn't feel like being up that early, or if we were sick. Having Allison there reminded me that it is okay to be yourself at work. Up to that point, I was always so serious and worried about presenting myself as professional. That's probably why people, including David, were so stand-offish with me. With Allison there, we always made silly jokes or songs up, and we got through even the most menial of tasks in a cinch. During her training, I saw a difference between her and Trent immediately. Where I had to explain things to him at least six or seven times before he started to do things on his own, Allison jotted down detailed notes. I only had to explain things once and observe her a couple of times before she had each step down to a science.

"I just want you to know how much I appreciate your work ethic and your positive attitude at work," I said. After only a couple of months, she was miles ahead of where Trent was well into his year with us.

"No problem. I love it here," she said.

I knew it was true. Finally, I was working with someone who got it, someone who loved the wine as much as I did, and who was willing to do what it took to produce the best possible product. My boss from Planet Tan made T-shirts for us, once, that said, "WIT," in big, bold letters. It stood for "Whatever it takes," one of his many motivational phrases. I thought of that slogan when I realized what a powerful team Allison and I were. I gave her tasks, and she

knocked them out with little error. Hazing wasn't effective, since she paid such close attention and could call most of my bluffs.

"Do I put all these in?" she asked.

The yeast is stored in packets, each containing five grams, for freshness. Most of our six-gallon batches need only five grams of yeast, but the Ports use quadruple that amount. She was dumping yeast into the starts, and the extra packets triggered the query.

"Yeah," I said. I tried to look busy, so I could trick her.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead," I said. I wasn't looking at her. When she opened the fourth and final packet and tilted it over the batch, I struck.

"Wait, you didn't put all of those in, did you?" I said.

"What? You just told me to," she said. For about three seconds, she was panicked.

"Right?"

"Oh, no," I said.

"Shut up, dude," she said.

I couldn't keep a straight face, and we both laughed. Allison was sharp, and since nobody told me how I was doing when I was in my first year, I wanted to extend to her that courtesy.

"You know the ins and outs, now, so I want to tell you about the mistake that broke my previous assistant, and then I want to tell you about a mistake I made early-on, because they were both a result of over-confidence and negligence," I said

"Okay," she said.

"I left a note for Trent to stir the two Port batches I left for him on one of his solo days. He had one day per week that he got to work alone. I racked the two batches for him and cleaned

the buckets, just so he could have all the time he needed to de-gas them. You know how it sometimes takes a very long time to de-gas Ports...”

“I know! It takes forever,” she said.

“Right? Well, I had them in carboys, ready to be stirred, and he called me to ask if I was sure they needed to be stirred. I said they were, and reminded him which shelf the batches were on. Then, we hung up. When I came in the next day, the floor was sticky all over and the Ports I wanted him to stir still had all of their ingredients in their pouches, right where I had left them for him. Puzzling, right? So, I began looking around to see what he had done the day before, since that was the only task I left for him. When I found out, I wished I hadn’t known after all.”

“What did he do?”

“He stirred two batches of Port... the two I started the day before. Trent stopped fermentation right after it began, and now we have two carboys full of damn-good grape juice. That is all it will ever be.”

“You can’t start it again? Oh ya, that’s right, because he already put the sorbate and metabisulphite in,” she said.

“Exactly. So, let’s think about what he should have done to prevent the mix-up. Well, number one, he should have looked at the tag, which would have told him I just started it yesterday. Number two, he should have tasted it before he added any chemicals to it. You know we always taste everything at each step in the process, but he didn’t do that.”

“That’s the best part of the job,” she said.

“I know, but you’d be surprised how many steps were skipped. Number three, the carboy probably exploded, sky-high, when he added the sorbate and metabisulphite to stop fermentation, and Port juice is not something that you can mop up in one fail swoop. That’s why the floors

were all sticky,” I said.

"You're like an investigator."

While she was in awe of the dreaded Port fiasco of 2010, I told her about my own mistake with the spiky, moldy elderflowers when I was away for spring break. I like to think she appreciated that I was willing to expose my own flaws. That conversation with Allison helped me realize it was a good training experience to share my mistakes. I never would have felt comfortable exposing myself like that in any of my previous management jobs, but for some reason I felt confident. I was no longer threatened by having a good assistant, and as it turned out, on her first big tank start, the Merlot, we encountered problems.

When I pitched the yeast into that large, cylindrical tank in early 2011, I knew I had done everything properly, like clockwork, the same way I had done it at least thirty times before. Allison and I cleaned the tank and scrubbed its walls with a soft-bristled brush, so as not to scratch it up. That cylinder was rinsed and sanitized and rinsed again along with the pump we used to stir its contents. We installed the clean and dry sample tap to the tank securely and we filled the tank to the proper level with filtered water. The oak bucket was sanitized along the oak bag, and the oak was put into the wine must with care. When I released the Yeastie Boys from their packaging and sprinkled them over the surface in a uniform layer, they should have been happy. They should have gone on an all-you-can-eat conversion spree, but somehow they got lazy.

Checking specific gravity, that reliable measure of sugar content in the first three to five

days of fermentation is important. I've found that some varietals taste better with more sugar and some with less, and if I do not monitor the levels carefully, some will turn out too dry. I used to rack everything at the same time, no matter what the varietal called for, because that is what I was trained to do. Keeping a close eye on that many batches made my head swim at first, but that was back then, and when Allison and I started that tank of Merlot, I was much more experienced. Sometimes things just don't go as expected.

Once yeast cells become lazy, there is not much you can do to revive them. The challenge is in getting the old yeast out of the solution to begin again with fresh yeast. I'd been going along, assuming I was trained correctly, and in my job history it had always been best to do things exactly as you were trained, so as to stay on the good side of the employer, to do a good job. Bob took a lot more short cuts than he should have, so I had to figure it out on my own, by trial and error. Eventually, I made the decision to do things in the most efficient and safe fashion for the wine, and I ended up changing my routine quite a bit.

When Bob and I dealt with a stuck fermentation together back in 2009, he didn't even want to attempt a fix. That batch stuck because it was too cold. Bob had some wild idea to ferment it at a very low temperature, using the cooling coils in the smaller tanks to keep the temperature down instead of allowing the yeast to become very active. His idea was to preserve some of the fruitiness that is lost during fermentation, which is a sound idea. The problem is that the yeast doesn't like it too cold or too hot. Either of these will piss them off, and you wouldn't like it when they're angry, because it means sweet wine for you.

All I could do, after Bob finally left the winery, was try and catch mistakes like that and change my technique accordingly. The problem was that I didn't know where stuck fermentation started or how to change what I was doing to ensure it wouldn't happen again. The Chardonnay

and trio Blanca were made in the smaller, white tanks, but this time it was a large tank of red. The blasted Merlot was stuck.

A stuck fermentation at a specific gravity level of 1.010 is bad, much worse than, say, 1.040, for example. If the batch is stuck, you want to have a decent amount of sugar left for the new yeast cells to feed on. If the solution is too dry, the yeast will become lazy easily and you're back where you started. When I checked the batch of Merlot at four and a half days into fermentation, it seemed like things were under way. Specific gravity readings were stable at 1.010 and the batch was nearly finished. I felt the tank and it was still slightly warm, a good sign the Yeastie Boys were still happy. Unfortunately, it was an illusion.

On day six, I read the hydrometer again: The reading was clear as crystal at 1.010. The smooth, outside wall of the tank was cold to the touch and there were very few bubbles in the solution. Bubbles would be a good sign, a sign of active yeast converting sugar into carbon dioxide and natural sulphates. This was not a good situation. I didn't know whether or not to tell David at that point. I didn't want him to be shocked later if I couldn't fix it, but I also didn't want to tell him we may be in trouble. I was hoping to avoid the problem altogether, but it was going to take some time to try and fix this.

I sanitized my oak paddle before stirring up the tank up. The idea is to rouse the yeast from the tank floor and infuse them back into the wine. Possibly, this could revive them enough to convert what sugar remained. Peering over at the bar through a display case full of wine bottle holders in the shape of sexy high-heeled shoes, I stirred up the batch and I saw that David was laughing, a large smile stretched across his lips. Score! He's in a good mood, I thought. I'd act like I needed a glass from behind the bar and inject myself into the conversation he was having with Johanna, our new office manager. Maybe I'd have a chance to mention it casually, for now.

"You know, they're supposed to be making a *Smiths* comic book," he said. I brushed the bar with my left hand, swinging around it to the other side. "That's going to be awesome."

We liked many of the same bands: *U2*, *Pearl Jam*, *The Smiths*, *Depeche Mode*, I could never list them all.

"Really? That's crazy," I said.

"I can't even imagine what that's going to be like," he said.

I have only observed it a few times, but sometimes David gets this child-like sparkle in his eyes. I can't tell you what does it, but it's a smile that stretches so far, it reaches into the corners of the eyes. His smile must tilt his eyes in some way, to reflect the light into a glint. Whatever caused it, this was one of those times and I couldn't even think of telling him about the Merlot at a time like that. Maybe it's just really slow, I thought, considering I may have exaggerated the urgency of the situation. I could wait a few more days to see how it goes, first... and with that I decided to put it off a little longer.

The dread I felt while I sanitized and rinsed the hydrometer on the tenth day of fermentation reminded me of the time my father picked me up from my summer job at a local water park one day. I was 16 at the time, but I didn't have a car until much later, when I was a senior. Dad was very solemn when he arrived that day. As soon as I got in the car and shut the door, I figured out why.

"Your mom found your birth control pills," he said.

Dad was sympathetic, but nothing could lessen the dread. That ride home took twenty minutes, but it felt like two hours, because I knew my mother would be sitting in the living room, on those same gray couches she always sat us down on when she had something important to talk with us about, waiting for me to get there. Most likely she would be crying, angry and

disappointed. That same dread is what I felt as I readied my hydrometer to check the Merlot that day.

I grabbed the ladder and dragged it with my right hand while I held on to the hydrometer with my right hand. They're extremely breakable, those hydrometers, and I hated asking David for new ones when I dropped them. Moving slower than usual that morning due to a hangover, I eventually had to set up that ladder and climb it, pull the lid off the tank and float the bobbing truth-teller in the solution. I knew it hadn't moved before I even looked at the reading. I could tell just by how much of the hydrometer was sticking out from the surface. 'Ugh,' my gurgling gut gasped.

Sure enough, it was stuck at 1.010, and I decided to taste it to see if, maybe, I could pass it off as a delicious, slightly off-dry Merlot. We'll just market it as a very fruity Merlot, yes, I thought. Now I wasn't feeling so bad. I could make this work. In my mind, it was as good as solved. I grabbed a glass from behind the tasting bar and nearly skipped back into the tank room, excited about the possibility of the wine tasting dry enough not to worry about the specific gravity. Sometimes they tasted great a little above 1.000 or at least right at 1.000.

I put the glass under the sample tap and twisted the silver knob to the left until a nice chunk popped out of it, residual lees that settle in anything that has an opening or sticks out, sample tap included. When you take the first sample, you have to dump out the first bit to get a good idea of how the wine tastes. I dumped out the chunky part and rinsed the glass clean. After swinging the wine glass twice, violently up and down, to get as much water out as possible, I took another sample. The ruby-red stream that emerged was clear and enticing.

When I stuck my nose into the mouth of the glass, I came to realize the bouquet was fruity, as the uppity bunch may say, but I could smell the sugar. When I sipped it, I rolled it

around on my tongue a good while before swallowing my first sip. Then, without stopping to taste it, I took another swig and did the same. After swallowing, I got a fruity taste, but not sweet. A second later, I tasted the oak and a slight hint of tannins. 'So far, so good,' I thought.

Then, it came over my tongue in a big wave... sugar, and lots of it. Almost as sweet as the red wine we intentionally make sweet, it was stuck as stuck could be. I knew I had to tell David, but I didn't know how. Maybe I could tell him the problem is pending until I fix it. Yeah, optimism, I thought. Maybe I should be solemn and disappointed about the stuck fermentation; I deeply regret to inform you that the Merlot may not make it. No, that would make it seem like I didn't have any confidence in myself. He couldn't see me as weak. One thing I was trying to avoid was losing David's confidence in me.

Finally, I decided to just tell him whichever way it came out, because the decision was causing me quite a bit of anxiety, and my palms were sweaty and I wanted to be over it. Down with the damned Merlot, I thought. Pumped up, I put on my game face and marched out to the office to talk to David. Rack-lined walls held bottles from ceiling to floor, and there were shelves full of binders, reams of paper and file cabinets, but no David, so I looked out by the tasting bar. No David.

"Where is David?" I asked. Mark was an employee I did my best to avoid contact with, since I couldn't stand to overhear him feed our customers incorrect information about the winery and our wines.

"He went to run some errands," he said.

Mark seemed surprised about my question. I thought it may have something to do with my anxiety level, so I attempted to correct the mood. "Oh, sorry Mark. I just ran around the whole store, looking for him."

Mark was in the same demographic as Bob and Doug, but hopefully I didn't hold it against him. Still, I had yet to catch on to the best way to communicate with this group of males. I'm sure, to them, I was just some young girl trying to take control, which I was. Even though I tried to draw a line between bossy and authoritative, they kept melting together into the same emotion.

Most of the younger employees were fine with my methods and David was much easier to talk to. He was beginning to consult with me on which varietals we wanted to make, and he was listening to my needs, getting the supplies I required without asking too many questions... trust. I went into work every morning and began my first task immediately. Whenever David happened to walk by for something he needed, we said, "Good morning." He didn't look over my shoulder all day, instead giving me total autonomy, conditions I work best under. In fact, if I had my way I wouldn't have been in charge of the other employees at all, instead focusing completely on the wine. As it was, though, I had to deal with my staff, but it was nice to have David in my corner.

Now, I was going to injure our bond by telling him we had a very expensive problem, but I had no choice in the matter. I'd waited as long as I could already. When David returned from running errands, we were putting cheeses and crackers in the fridge, items he bought on a weekly basis for cheese platters we served at the tasting bar. I opened the refrigerator door to throw a block of Gouda in, and the words just poured out of my mouth like a tipped jar of jelly beans.

"David, the Merlot is stuck. I'm going to do all I can to fix it, and I'm feeling positive about it," I said. 'Sometimes an air of confidence can soften the blow,' I thought. "We could have a large batch of sweet red, though, if it can't be fixed. These things are iffy," I said. I was physically shaking. I hated when my body wouldn't cooperate with me.

"Okay, well let's see what you can do with it," he said. "I appreciate you telling me."

He still sounded caring and relatively calm... irritated but calm. I went to work racking the wine immediately. First, I purged the tank, releasing the bottom valve over a bucket to get the large plug of lees out of the way that had settled into the hole in the tank floor. Then, I sanitized the tank next to it with the pump and hooked the two tanks together with the hoses on the intake and output of the pump. Opening each of the valves at the bottom of each tank, gravity pushes the wine, slowly and carefully, into the clean tank. If the pump is turned on too high or too early, the lees will get sucked into the clean tank, and you must prevent as many of the lazy Yeastie Boys from getting into the clean tank as possible.

When both tanks were about half-full, I closed the output valve of the pump halfway and flipped the switch. Then, I had to climb up the ladder until just before the old tank was empty, giving me time to fly back down the ladder and close the valve on the clean tank before the lees could get sucked in at the end. It's time-sensitive and stressful, but it can be done single-handedly. Luckily, I had gone several stretches without an assistant and was accustomed to doing things on my own, so Allison could have some days off each week to work at her other job.

After the wine was transferred to the clean tank, I moved my hoses around and opened both valves on the clean tank before flipping the pump back on. Wine was sucked into the pump from the bottom hose and pushed out the tube attached to the outgoing hose inside the tank. I opened the valve on the pump to full-blast to get the wine going in a vortex. Then, I added the yeast energizer, or thiamin hydrochloride, to the wine.

When I read about stuck fermentations, the *Grapestompers* website had suggested I ask a pharmacist for thiamin hydrochloride, so I'd gone over to the local *Walgreen's* to acquire some. At the pharmacy counter labeled 'consultations', I waited for someone to come into view. When she addressed me, I asked her for the thiamin hydrochloride and she cocked her head to the side.

"I'm gonna have to ask somebody about that. Hold on real quick," she said. When she returned, she looked annoyed. "I'm coming around to your side," she said.

She came around and walked right past me, so I assumed I should follow. Stopping in front of the vitamins, she scanned the labels for a few seconds before handing me a bottle of vitamin B-1.

"Oh!" I couldn't help but laugh. "It's B-1? That's so funny. I wonder why they didn't just say that." I said.

She didn't respond, instead heading back out of sight before I could ask her any other dumb questions. Maybe I would have known if I'd gone to school for wine making. Oenology is the fancy term for the study of all things related to wine making besides the viticulture, or growing grapes and grape harvesting. I guess, then, I could technically call myself an oenologist, if I could pronounce it. After standing in the drugstore vitamin isle for at least a minute and a half looking at the label of the B-1 in awe, I went to the counter across the store to purchase it, and I thought about how funny it was that B vitamins not only give me energy, but also the Yeastie Boys.

Before I started the re-rack, I had to crush the B-1 tablets to get a fine powder, and if you've ever tried to crush vitamin tablets before, you know this is far from easy. If I'd had a proper mortar and pistil, I might have had an easier time with it. Instead, I was stuck with a plastic measuring cup and a spoon. I felt like one of *The Three Stooges* or a clumsy Lucille Ball as I pushed the spoon against the tablets, popping one onto the floor and another into the drain in the sink. Then, I decided to put the tablets into a plastic bag to contain them before pressing on them with the spoon. This proved to be better, but I still couldn't get them as powdery as I would have liked.

Sprinkling the yeast energizer into the swirling wine, I wished for the best and whispered, "Okay, now make my new little Yeastie Boys happy, okay?" The powdery bits hit the surface and swished down into the vortex. After giving it time to infuse, I closed the valve at the bottom of the tank and then the top valve before flipping the pump off. Then, it was in with the Yeastie Boys, a new layer over the top of the wine and endless possibilities, fresh. I pushed the wine that remained in the hoses through and into the tank with pressurized nitrogen and went to retrieve the enormous lid.

As wide and round as the mouth of the tank, the lid is difficult to manage up the ladder. Equally difficult is the operation of the hand pump used to pressurize the lid so it will be airtight. When combined, it is surely a sight to behold. I trekked up the ladder with the lid and wobbled it almost into place, holding it by the handle and balancing it just on the edge of the tank's top. Then, I turned the knob on the hand-pump to just the right amount of pressure so that I could quickly pump air into the tube in the lid that makes the seal. I placed the pump between my thighs, pump-handle forward, positioned the lid just above the surface of the liquid, and pumped quickly until I felt the lid was secure enough to let go of. So, there I was pumping between my legs while my other hand held this huge lid, and I did all this in the front window of the store.

And for all that effort, that damned Merlot didn't move a muscle, not even a half-hash on the old hydrometer. What else could I do but make it into a mulled holiday wine? I've been making that spiced wine every holiday season since then, too, right along with the apple pie Chardonnay. It was a good lesson, for Allison, in what can happen even when you think you've done everything correctly.

Holding a festival where we celebrate the harvesting of the grapes sounds like a wonderful idea, until it turns into something else. It's like Christmas. The holiday is supposed to be the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but it's more of a commercial nightmare. Commerce rules, religion comes in last and I'm torn. Even as a person who isn't all that religious, it seems fake and contrived. Grapefest in Grapevine, Texas reminds me of that. The attendees do not know much about wine, and that's the exciting part. I love the idea of putting on a festival that turns people on to wine. The problem is that they have no idea what the significance of the harvest is, or even that it is harvest time at all. In fact, many people who attend do not even drink wine at the festival, opting instead for the beer lines. What nobody is talking about, what they leave out, is that there is no harvesting of wine grapes in Grapevine. A couple of wineries have little vineyards for show and ambiance, and they may use a few of those puny grapes along with grapes they acquire elsewhere, but Grapevine does not produce wine grapes. During Grapefest, they even have an event called, "The Blessing of the Vines," where (and I shit you not) they have a priest come to one of the mini-vineyards and actually bless the vines. I cannot believe the church allows this.

My enjoyment of Grapefest comes from pouring wine tastings, because it is one of the few opportunities I have to get customer feedback about the wine. Occasionally, compliments are handed down to me from Johanna or one of the bartenders, but mostly I am in the dark about how my wines are being received. Brandon works wine trails and festivals with me, and I can't say I mind it that he introduces me as the head winemaker when customers have questions. Everything seems to have melted into place, and I am now the recognized expert. Our customers have fun at Su Vino, and we don't mind taking the extra time to talk to them about the wine or

anything else. The winery has a nice, down-home Texas feel in an upscale, boutique setting. At Grapefest, though, the time for conversation is short. The lines at the tasting bars never diminish, instead lengthening as the day rolls on.

Grapefest has become more a reason to close the street and collect a cover charge than anything else. Admission gets you inside the gates. Once you're there, you pay for wine tastings or glasses of wine at the wineries. For street food, beer or wine outside the wineries, people first wait in line to buy tickets, and wait in line again to spend them. The courtyard on Main Street once housed booths which contained wines from around the world. Now, it houses beers from around the world and there is a carnival for the kids. Kids at a wine festival? Yes. This used to be the kind of thing you got a babysitter for. Now, parents either drink so much, you wonder how the kids are getting home, or they don't drink at all, negating the whole point of having a wine festival to begin with.

One year, I watched a child bend over and vomit all over the floor in the middle of the winery. His mother simply grabbed her glass of wine, then her child, and continued talking to her friend. The father rolled his eyes as the smell of vomit permeated our tasting room, and before I knew it they were gone, leaving the disease-infested vomit behind.

I wondered if cleaning up vomit was in my job description, and then I scolded myself for being immature. Did those parents leave the festival or did they just move on to the next winery, disregarding the health of the child. As I continued breathing in the rancid smell of what remained, I thought only the worst of those parents. "We already paid to get in," they may have rationalized. I pictured them leaving their child at the carnival so he wouldn't embarrass them anymore while they drank.

Booth vendors up and down the street, Grapefest is just another festival for merchants

who can't afford to rent out business space. They sling homemade jewelry and mark-up mail-order crap from Taiwan. Rarely do you see any wine-related items in those booths. In fact, the most interesting Grapefest booth I ever saw was occupied by a man who sold various pepper plants. Every year, the same plumber rents the space directly in front of Su Vino. He gives away free plungers, and everyone who walks into our fine establishment is carrying a damn toilet plunger. What kind of message does that send? Could the wine possibly taste right when you're carrying a plunger that reeks of new rubber? Hmmm... I'm getting tar on the finish. I mean, come on... people are thinking about dirty toilet water while they're drinking my wine!

What would Bacchus think of all this? The god of wine would want people to be inspired by wine, to go outside their limitations and become free from the confines of the everyday routine, but what would he think of the beer, bands and brats? Some called him Dionysus, a god that stood for not only wine's intoxicating quality, but the value it had in a social or business setting. Wine at a business meeting, for example, is like lubricant on a condom. It eases the friction that comes with nerves and cynicism so people can communicate. What about those who get so "inspired" by wine, they pass out on friends, who drag them out of the festival gates like sacks of potatoes? What about the kid with the broken arm from a bounce-house injury who screams for his "inspired" parents, but cannot find them? How free are we talking, here, Dio?

Would Dionysus approve of the "fruit wines" I shamefully produce at three times the rate of the bold reds which I love so much? If these oversized wine coolers are what our customers want, we're going to make them. It's pure business, and I'm happy to do what David wants, but deep-down I am not a fan of these sweet monstrosities. In Texas, or at least in this part of Texas, our customers like wines that are sweet enough to disguise the alcohol. Regularly, I take a perfectly-good Chardonnay or Riesling, and I back-sweeten them with fruit juices and

concentrates. On the plus-side, sweet wines are great starter wines, so there is the potential for a great group of connoisseurs if we give them a chance to develop their palates. How snobby do I sound right now? Somehow it just happened, and I am still uncomfortable about that. My twenty-year-old self might call me a sell-out, but maybe I only hated those wine snobs because I envied them.

I'm just glad Americans are drinking wine at all. More and more, people are warming up to the idea of having wine with dinner. It may not be every day, but we're getting there. In moderation, red wine can be a boost in antioxidants and improve the overall mood. Not to mention, food tastes better with wine and wine tastes better with food, a winning combination. To be able to enjoy the robust flavor of a glass of dark-red Malbec on a candle-lit back porch in North Texas is heaven, and sometimes it can make a problem disappear.

Baseball players have shoulders or knees go out, taking them out of the profession, permanently. Football players suffer career-ending blows every season. I suppose, if you are a horn player and contract COPD, a disease that decreases lung capacity, it could end your musical career. Nothing could inhibit me from making wine, I thought... until it happened.

Just a routine procedure, they said it was. My three p.m. dentist appointment was for one cavity, but they wanted me to get a crown and several fillings while I was there to, "get it all out of the way."

"Then, it will be over," the nurse said. She was ever-reassuring, and I was all hopped up on nitrous oxide.

"Sure," I said.

I was more interested in the TV screen in front of me playing *Polar Express*. The characters in that movie are already strange-looking, but on nitrous they were fuzzy and made me laugh. Before I knew it, a piece of paper and a pen were shoved between my face and the screen, and I signed off on a five-hour procedure.

Like a tiny lightning bolt in my tongue, a horrible sensation forced an unintentional shriek from my throat early-on in the procedure. Splinters of pain shot straight through my tongue and jaw while The Dentist was giving me the third set of Novocain injections. I have an abnormally rapid absorption rate when it comes to this drug, which means it doesn't work too well on me, so I need several extra injections to get numb. The electricity echoed through my tongue, and The Dentist asked, "Did I zing you?"

"Ugh-huh," I said. I gurgled through the pool of saliva they had neglected too long with the sucker.

"I'm sorry about that," he said.

The procedure also included a violent flossing session. The Dentist couldn't get floss between my new crown and the tooth beside it, so he forced the floss down with all his might and sliced my gums deep, a pain I felt through the Novocain. Then, he tried to pull the floss back out and the crown popped off. The pulling away of the permanent cement was additionally painful and a throbbing started deep in my jaw. It beat right along with my heart, and I felt dizzy. The Dentist had also inadvertently punched me in the face when he pulled the floss out.

"Well, that's never happened before," The Dentist said. Unfortunately, this was not the most reassuring thing he might have said. My breathing escalated and I started to feel like I was in danger, like I needed to get out of there.

"Wha id go-ig ON?"

I whimpered through the gauze they had stuffed into my mouth, to stop the bleeding. I'd held my tongue through all of it so far, and enough was enough. Tears began to well up in my eyes out of fear, and I couldn't stop them.

"I am so sorry, sweetie," the nice nurse said.

Her tone brought me a small amount of comfort, but something in her eyes made me feel like she was worried. As terrified as I was, I had to suffer through the rest of the procedure. Certainly, I couldn't leave with a gaping hole and exposed nerve in my gums.

By the time I walked out of that office, it was eight p.m., and I was already in extreme pain, and when I picked up the painkillers from the pharmacy, I was in agony. Even more, I hadn't eaten all day because I was only going in for a cavity and figured I would just eat a couple hours after. Now, I needed food so the pain meds wouldn't make me hurl, but I couldn't eat because both sides of my mouth were numb. Sucking down broth and yogurt would have to suffice.

About four hours later, most of my mouth was tingling again, a good sign that my senses were returning. The right side of my tongue, however, was completely without feeling. Even when I bit down on it, there was nothing. I tried to stay calm about it, thinking that surely, it would be back to normal in the morning. If my experience from previous procedures was an indication, the feeling always comes back. I forced down some noodles and a painkiller and drifted off to sleep without any trouble.

When I woke up the next morning, the right side of my tongue felt dead. My speech was off, because a strange lisp had formed. The bottom-right Portion of my jaw was numb, too. It felt like someone drew a line straight down the middle of my tongue and jaw. Exactly half was dead.

I called The Dentist immediately, and he assured me it would be back in a matter of days.

"Dayth?!"

I shouted in response. I couldn't imagine days of this, but I had no time to think about it, or I would be late for work. Driving there, I used my favorite radio station to help me forget about my mouth, and even though David Bowie was the perfect distraction, he wouldn't be able to come to my rescue once I got to work.

About an hour into my shift at Su Vino, I realized something horrible. Blending Port meant a lot of tasting. I usually blended the Port wines on days when I didn't drive. Allison and I had a nice carpool situation going. In fact, the entire production crew lived in Denton, about thirty-five minutes away, so carpool cut a chunk out of my gas expenditures. I was on pain killers and shouldn't have been driving that day, anyway... or tasting wine, probably... but what the hell? Chocolate liquor and extracts, a sanitized spoon and clean wine glass; I gathered all the things I needed. Then, I poured the first ingredients in. Stirring the batch, I could smell the chocolate aroma wafting up from the wine. Tilting the carboy over, I poured a sample into my glass, and then it hit me. Oh, shit! What if I can't taste it? I won't know how much chocolate to add, or how much extract. To confirm my suspicion, I took some of the chocolate Port into my mouth and let it roll around on my tongue for a moment.

Hmmm, metal with a side of cardboard. At once, I made several decisions. I would not say anything about this to David, because I didn't know if my taste would return to normal after the numbing wore off and I couldn't have him questioning whether I was able to do my job properly. I didn't know if this would ever heal, because I didn't trust The Dentist one bit. Allison would have to be let in on it, or I wouldn't be able to blend Port that day. I would have to show my vulnerability to her, because I needed her to taste the wine. The biggest decision I made in

that moment was to escape the building immediately and call The Dentist again. I needed to know what the worst-case scenario was.

"I'll be right back. Hey, would you mind tath-ting this for me?"

"Sure," Allison said.

I ran around the corner, through the stock room and out the back door before dialing The Dentist.

"Can I talk to the de-nith again? I can't tathe anything. I justh want to know how many time-th has thith happened? Does your tathe go back to normal when the feeling comes back? How long can it take? Worth cathe thenario, here." I exploded with uncertainty all over that poor receptionist.

"Hold on, hon. Let me get him," she said.

"Shannon?" The Dentist asked.

"Yeth, I'm here."

He went on to tell me that he has never had this happen to a patient, which I responded in my head with a yeah, right.

"This could take several months to heal. I hate this for you, but these things just happen sometimes," he said.

Furious, I looked to the internet for answers. The problem was, I mostly found accounts from people who never got feeling back. They were all discouraged and hopeless. To lose feeling in such a small part of your body shouldn't be this big a deal, especially compared to those who lose feeling in entire quadrants of their bodies or more. This part, though... the tongue, was something I took for granted. My palate could once pick out the slightest bit of rosemary in onion rings from the local burger joint or a touch of freesia in a fruit drink from Alicante by the

esplanade. After that trip to the dentist, any hint of acid in food or drink tasted like metal, and everything I attempted to consume was strange and unpleasant. Textures in foods that never bothered me before were intolerable. Even without the horrible reality that the key to making wine is to taste it at every step of the way, life without taste sucked.

When I awoke a few days later to an intense tingling on the right side of my tongue, I considered it a good omen. Any feeling is better than no feeling, right? Wrong. It felt like a million needles were poking me at once, or like I'd burned my tongue so badly I couldn't feel the top layers of it. The pain was ridiculous, sometimes like my tongue was on fire and other times like electric shocks were travelling through it. These sensations often brought me to tears, and I was beginning to understand what those hopeless souls online were so upset about.

Two weeks after the procedure, I could taste bland or buttery things, but the wine still tasted like a rusty pipe. Lucky for me, my vacation to Spain was coming up, so I thought it would be best to avoid the subject of my numb tongue until then, in hopes that the feeling would return before I came home. It took six weeks for the penny taste to leave my tongue, and a few more to get rid of those electric shocks, but I recovered. It was the end of the world, though, for those long weeks, and I have to say I valued my job quite a bit more after the ordeal. The Dentist didn't stop hearing from me until he agreed to a partial refund. Even though it didn't compare to what I dealt with, it made him human in my eyes, for the first time. I still feel that tooth on occasion, and when I do my tongue reacts with a little electrical impulse, almost as though it remembers.

When Allison got married, I hired her husband, Jesse, as well as another Jesse, who were

both members of our fraternity. They quickly became known as The Jesses to the rest of the winery staff. Since Chris had gone away, they were our new bottlers. The Bottlers had transitioned completely, from all retirees to all students. Brandon was working with them, too, part-time, and the trio became competent quickly. Little did I know, Allison and her husband were about to become the new winery power-couple. He was a fix-it master, instantly appealing to David. Bob used to cover the fix-its before he moved away, and since then we had struggled with broken equipment and appliances.

The new power-couple began going into work early, which threatened me. As much as I wanted to ignore it, I was worried they were showing me up. If I asked them to come in at two p.m., they came in at one p.m., and Allison would be well into our work for the day before I got there. Wait a minute, I thought, I'm supposed to be in control, here. Pushing out the competition was my shtick, but I didn't see it coming. Up until the power-couple emerged, I didn't think Allison was going to be a threat to me, but slowly I realized they were becoming less receptive to my suggestions and requests.

To beat them at their own game, I started coming in early for nearly every shift. I needed an edge, something that would set me above and apart from Allison. Staying serious and professional at work was my way of combating my laid-back and silly nature, but Allison laid her silliness out on the table. It seemed her method was working better to appeal to David. Like Chris, it took less than half the time for David to warm up to Allison as it had for him to warm up to me.

"He likes guys," Chari said. We were talking about how close he and Chris had become. It justified my delayed connection with him when she said that. At least, it was justified... until Allison came along. Jealousy was burning inside me and I wanted to keep it down.

"You've been standing in the same spot all day long," David said. He was sympathizing with Allison about a task I did once a week, without an assistant for a year, and he never showed a bit of sympathy for me. My internal sneer fired up and I counter-acted it with a big, fake smile and an eye-bat for good measure.

"Poor thing," I said. "Those mean stirs won't give the girl a break."

Stirs are what we call batches that we are going to stop fermentation in. To do this, we have to stir the batch vigorously for several minutes with a drill. It's boring as hell, but it's nothing you're going to get body aches over. I found myself deliberately holding back in her training. The tasks I kept for myself were the most delicate, blending and adjusting flavor on each batch. Our clients paid a nice chunk of change to get a custom-made batch of wine, and I wanted to be sure they would come back for more. If I was going to be responsible for the wine, I wanted a hand in the finished product every time.

No matter how hard I tried, it seemed to me I was not indispensable. Allison was more than capable of doing anything and everything I did. David asked her to participate in events I was never asked to do, like pouring on the wine train at Christmas time. He also included her when he finally allowed me to start conducting Wine 101 classes for our clients. Wine 101 was something I always felt entitled to, but I figured David didn't trust me to do it, since he didn't until I had been a winemaker for over two years. Finally, I was asked to think of food pairings to go with our featured wines for the quarter, for the purpose of Wine 101. I was thrilled that he trusted me, at last. However, instead of it being a night with the winemaker, it was a night with the winemakers, Allison and Shannon. Allison tended to drink a little too much wine at work, and became loud and obnoxious, but this seemed more appealing to our customers than my serious demeanor. To them, I was the snobby wine-type they were intimidated by, and she was the fun

one. Did I mention I'm a Leo? I simply was not born to share my spotlight.

Just before Thanksgiving of 2011, I decided to write a proposal addressing all the aspects of production, and my compensation. Mainly, I would be ordering all of my own supplies, must and juice, bottles, caps, additives, ingredients, equipment and anything else we may need for production. It was a time-consuming task, with all the different vendors we ordered from. David was serving as the middle-man and I knew he wouldn't mind if I took that off his plate. Struggling with my worth, I couldn't think of anything but my paycheck, which was more than low for the work I had been doing. On the one hand, I was angry with David for not offering me a substantial raise thus far, but I never laid my expectations out on the table, either. As a result, I had de-valued myself over the two and a half years I had been there by allowing them to pay so little. With my proposal, I hoped to turn it around so I could continue to make wine after the completion of my Master's degree in May.

Hard facts could only help, so I did extensive research to find out what people were making in my industry, as well as what I would be making if I landed a low-level teaching job. I included these findings in my proposal. In my attempt to appeal to David and Chari, I also included a personal note about not having financial assistance after graduation and about repayment of student loans. Even though this proposal was written in November, it took me until the end of January to build up the guts to give it to David. After all, he could say no. Maybe he could find someone else, like me when I started, a go-getter that would work for nothing. Thus far, I rationalized my low wages as the side-effect of an apprenticeship, but now I needed a big-girl salary.

Meanwhile, he could be pitching the job to Allison. Maybe he didn't really like me underneath it all, and he was just looking for a push to replace me. My paranoia can make me

doubt anyone, even if they've given me no cause. On guard, I continued to go into work early, to avoid being shown up. I submitted my proposal on a Monday. Chari had strep throat and David had to leave work early to watch the kids. I had my proposal written, signed and sealed in an envelope, ready to submit. My heart raced every time I thought about giving it to him, and when I learned he was leaving early, the anxiety worsened. Would he laugh at my audacity and replace me immediately? I worried that he would feel cornered and not understand that I only wanted to get a dialogue going. Then, I second-guessed the amount I asked for, worried I hadn't left any room for negotiating. I wondered if I set the bar too low. By the time I grew the balls to hand over that envelope, David was gathering his things to head home.

"Hey, David?" I asked.

"Yeah?"

"I drew up some ideas for the added responsibilities we talked about," I said. In a conversation we had weeks earlier, I'd asked him about taking over ordering. "You and Chari can take a look at it and tell me what you think," I said. I handed the crinkled envelope over and figured I must have been gripping it a little too tightly.

"Okay, thanks," he said.

David grabbed the envelope before he turned and walked out the door. Suddenly, a burst of euphoria came over me, a release of tension that had been building up for months while I researched and debated about whether or not to ask for more money. David was in the best mood ever the next day, and the day after that he trained me a bit on ordering. I figured that was a great sign, but I was still skeptical. He also asked Allison to perform special duties that week, namely to help with Girls' Night Out.

Maybe it's because she's prettier, and more outgoing at work than I am, I thought. Then, it

was staring me right in the face. No, she really is more approachable than I am. That is precisely it. My serious exterior is read as being rough or tough, and maybe I'm the cynic. Allison is light and happy, smiling even through the days when she is hung-over or sickly, and I bitch and moan. I'm a whiner, and everyone who has worked with me has had to endure it at one time or another.

I don't handle anxiety and stress well, though I continue to do things that invite the anxiety in, like my concern with how David sees me. My concern shouldn't be whether or not I'm being taken advantage of, or whether Allison is going to take my job. I should be worried about my demeanor, because nobody likes a bitch. Even so, I couldn't get the idea out of my head that I had devalued myself just by not saying anything sooner about my paycheck, and I knew he could have Allison cheaper. It was crushing me, and the pressure was turning me into Bob.

"I dub thee... Sergeant Weiner Whiner!" one sister said. She hung a stringed banana around my neck, inscribed with the words *Sgt. Weiner Whiner*.

"Weiner Whiner, Weiner Whiner," everyone shouted.

I had been blindfolded for over two hours while my pledge-sisters went through the ritual of the week. This time, we had to acknowledge everyone in the room, even those we did not know, by their name, nickname, pledge year, semester and class name. While I was waiting, I'd had several "reds", which was my choice when I was asked, "Red or yellow?" "Red" was fruit punch and bottom-shelf white rum and "Yellow" was lemonade and cheap vodka. So there I was, hammered off "reds" and standing in the middle of a mob yelling "Weiner Whiner" at me without an inkling of an idea why.

"Go back and sit with your pledge sisters," another sister said. She guided me back to the tiny hallway of whoever's apartment we were in.

"What's yours?" my pledge sisters asked.

"My what?" I was still clueless.

"Your nickname!"

"Oh, is that what this is? Damnit! There are way too many syllables for this to catch on!" I said. I'd always wanted my nickname to be catchy, like all the brothers' nicknames. There's Greazy, Seacrest, Pinky, Stinky, and my favorite, Shimmy, which happens to be Brandon's nickname. My pledge sisters got great nicknames, like Barbie, Vato and Toofwuss. Sergeant Weiner Whiner was never going to stick, not that I wanted people to call me that anyway. When I asked my big sister what my nickname meant, she laughed.

"It's pretty self-explanatory. You bark orders at your pledges like a sergeant, but you whine and cry, like a baby, when you meet the slightest bit of resistance," she said.

"Oh," I said.

What I'd failed to recognize was just how appropriate that nickname was, and even though people didn't call me Sergeant Weiner Whiner, the idea definitely stuck with me. Whining about the unfair is kind of my thing, though I have tapered it significantly since pledge-ship.

After Allison started working with me at the winery, David's image of me must have changed completely from what it was. When we are working, David can hear us talking, and our conversations must be pretty strange from an outsider's perspective.

"Did you know that Pebbles showed up at Seacrest's house for the Christmas party, and his ex came, too, even though nobody likes her?"

"Greazy's moving into Gilbert's house and Dom's girlfriend is moving in, too."

For us, it is just normal speak. In David's mind, we must hang out with some strange version of the *Mickey Mouse Club*. The Jesses' nicknames are "Shameless" and "Urinator", and Allison's is "Tightend". We are all connected by our friends and the experiences we shared in our coed fraternity. When we work together things run smoothly. That is why I stand behind my decision to staff the production crew with dependable friends who already got along great with each other.

We are a well-oiled machine of a crew, making, filtering and bottling wine more efficiently than any of the previous teams in my time at Su Vino. Even when there are little tensions, they are gone in a flash because we already know the ins and outs of each of our personalities. I know that when Allison is in a bad mood, which rarely happens, the best thing to do is just leave her alone for about twenty minutes. When I am in a bad mood, which often happens, Allison need only make a joke or do a few dance steps to break my sour streak. We love each other, all of us. That isn't something everyone has had the pleasure of knowing, a large group of friends that aren't just acquaintances, but lifetime friends. When you laugh at work, it doesn't suck. Even if you are the kind of person who could hate a job like this, you couldn't possibly stay in a bad mood with this bunch.

Conjuring up the confidence I once had was not easy, after I'd put myself in a defensive position with Allison. Luckily, our friendship intervened. Once I was aware that my insecurities were taking over, I tapered the childish jealousy and put my best foot forward. To have a teammate as great as the one I had in Allison is not something to waste on pettiness. When the

new year started, while I was hard at work on that proposal for David, Allison and I were producing more efficiently. The tanks were full, and we were keeping up with the workload, getting more hours on the clock and back to joking around all day.

"Listen," she would say. "Stop. Let's do our dance. Ready? Whoooooooooooooo!" she said. Gyration her hips in circles, she finished with "the arm", a move she dreamt about one night.

"We were going to a ceremony to accept the award for best winery, and David choreographed a dance routine for us. We were doing a last-minute rehearsal, and David corrected me. He goes, "No, Allison, the arm goes like this," and then he demonstrated it. "Like this," he says." Of course, she demonstrated "the arm" for my entertainment.

"What?! You are hilarious, dude. You're dreaming about the winery, eh? Not a good sign. It's in you, now. Ha-ha," I said.

"Let's get a glass of wine. Who cares if it's eleven a.m.?" she would say. "I'll have raspberry champagne!"

We have even perfected the sound our glasses make when we ding them together for our mandatory toasts. We couldn't drink a drop before the toast, and whatever task we are in the middle of must stop and wait for the toast. Ding! Bad days always happen, but it is how you deal with them that counts, so when I felt myself losing control of my temper, I was more conscious of it than before. My anger-management has been a long process that started back in high school. Teen angst took me fifteen years to get over, and sometimes it still rears its ugly head, though I guess I would call it diva-angst these days. At Su Vino, I was taking a long-term course in fine-tuning my communication skills, and that included managing my cynicism. Allison was a full-fledged winemaker and I was going to have to treat her like an equal. Part of me just didn't want

to share, because I felt like I needed to be more, somehow, to be in a position nobody could touch.

To step away from my self-inflicted, anxious situation with Allison allowed me to see the difference between someone trying to take my job away from me and my allowing someone to outshine me. Tenure isn't everything, and if I wanted to be the best, I was going to have to do something to become the best, to be the go-to person when questions came up about our wine. Allison was actually just a catalyst. Instead, it was a burden I placed on myself in order to keep achieving. I couldn't rest in my laurels if I strived for more. My mom is a busybody. Her mother is a busybody, and I am, too. It keeps me moving.

I can take a young, acidic Cabernet and even it out. I can balance the tannins in the fruit with oak, and if there is danger of losing flavor, I can stop the fermentation a bit early and let it slowly finish out at a cooler temperature. Patience and time tend to heal most of the challenges that come with making wine. After I learned not to freak out the moment something didn't go routinely, I had much better luck. It seems that sometimes the wine just needs a little extra time to ferment, or a more time in the bottle before it is ready for the next step. I wonder about that tank of Chardonnay we turned into apple pie wine, and how wonderful it might have been if we had just given it the TLC it deserved. Maybe my Merlot could have reached its full potential, as well.

When I started at Su Vino, I remember Andrew telling me it was "totally Kosher" to stay after work and drink a glass of wine or two, but never did. I figured I had enough little tastes

during the day, for quality control, I didn't need any more before I got in my car to drive home. Besides, Andrew was the only one who'd mentioned the perk, so I still wasn't sure about my boundaries. One night, though, I was working very late. The store was already closed and a private event, Girls' Night Out, was about to start. Each month, on a Thursday evening, there are thirty slots available for this event, and we usually sell out. For thirty bucks, anyone with a vagina can come to the party and play games, get tipsy, nibble on appetizers and bottle some wine. Everyone takes home a commemorative bottle and glasses of Champagne are also included.

While I stirred the umpteen-millionth vat of wine into a vortex in my little fermentation room behind the curtain, bicep and shoulder burning from repeated motion, a gaggle of giggling girly-girls lurked nearby. Every now and then, I could hear one of our staff ask one of the questions from a game, "Where was the last place you made whoopee, besides your home?", and after a burst of laughter, someone said, "the boat!" while another shouted, "New York!" When it came time for them to bottle their wine, it got even better.

"Okay, ladies, listen up... make sure it shoots way in there... not too fast, you know what happens if you go too fast... slip it over the tip...", Chari said.

Purposely, she inserted innuendos wherever possible, a sexy twist on her usual sheepl about how the bottling process works. More than anything, I wanted to go home and relax, to get away from the squeals that seemed to be getting higher in pitch as the night wore on. Still, I continued to stir, measure, sprinkle in bentonite, stir, lift, heave, sprinkle in the Yeastie Boys and repeat. Chari came around the corner after the bottling intro, took one look at me and frowned.

"Do you need a glass of wine?" she asked.

"That would be amazing, actually," I said.

"I can't believe you don't have one already. What kind? I'll go get it for you," she said.

"Thanks, Chari! Malbec, all the way."

Chari was a mystery to me early-on, but this gesture defined those boundaries. I liked her because she was direct, and she knew what she wanted. When I began working for David and Chari, she was pregnant with her second child, and she worked at the winery at least four days per week. During her third trimester, we had our big fight. There was a tank of wine, ready to filter, waiting for me. Before I wheeled my filtering machine out to the tank room, I had to clear a path. Mainly, I needed to move a huge bag of Styrofoam packing peanuts out of the way so I could get the unwieldy machine through. I grabbed the bag and began the awkward journey with it to the back room, where it lives.

Along the way, the corner of the six-foot bag brushed across a display case that held all of our specialty wine glasses, and wouldn't you know it? I broke one of them. The damn thing just flew right off that bottom shelf. I immediately walked over to David, head held low.

"I broke a glass with the Styrofoam peanuts. It was the one that says, "Mommy's Sippy Cup". I am so sorry, David," I said.

"It happens," he said. I could tell he was not happy about it, but he's a reasonable person. After going to retrieve a dust pan and broom to clean up my mess, I overheard David telling Chari I broke a Lolita glass. Lolita is the brand name.

"Oh God," she said. "Which one was it?"

"Mommy's Sippy Cup," he said.

"Shit! That's just great," she said.

Immediately, I knew someone had probably ordered the glass from our website, and now we didn't have it. To boot, it was just before Christmas, so someone was going to have to explain

what happened to a very disgruntled customer. As I collected the pieces of broken glass in my dust pan, I looked at one of the girls who was helping The Bottlers out that day and made an "oh shit" face, just the thing to do when you need to whine about something.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I broke a glass when I was putting away the bag of peanuts and Chari is super-pissed about it," I said.

"That's why I don't even bother telling them. I broke one the other day. Just cleaned it up and moved on," she said.

"Really?"

The reason it hadn't occurred to me not to say anything is because it just isn't a viable option. For one, if David and Chari want to know why a glass is missing, they can look at the footage from the cameras located around the store. Even if those cameras didn't exist, I still couldn't carry that with me, knowing I kept something like that from them. Maybe I should have kept it to myself, though, because Chari was border-line bitchy about it and I don't react well to people who are just like me. The best thing to do, I decided, was to go talk to her about it.

"Chari, I am so sorry about the glass. You seemed really upset about it, and I want you to know it really was just an accident. I mean, I've broken a few of the bar glasses, but I am extra-careful around the merchandise." I just kept talking, like I couldn't contain my groveling.

"Alright," she said.

About a week later, I was working with Chari again. She seemed stand-offish to me, and when I asked her a question, she was curt. Maybe it was just my own conscience, or perhaps she was still pissed about the glass, but by the end of the day, I just couldn't take it anymore. This was ridiculous, not to mention unprofessional, but my dumb ass decided to say something to a

pregnant woman about her attitude.

"Chari, I feel like you are still pissed off at me about the glass I broke, and I don't like it," I said. "Why don't you just take it out of my check so we can move on? I don't want you to be angry with me." Who the hell did I think I was, anyway?

"I'm not upset with you," she said.

"Are you sure? It seems like it," I said. Apparently I couldn't just shut up.

"It's fine," she said.

By that point, she was laughing at how ridiculous I was and it was over. Chari is a lot like me, actually. Maybe that's why David can put up with my shit. He has experience. Luckily, that really was the end of the controversy and a few years later, at the Christmas party, we were joking around about the incident.

"You were so pissed at me for, like, two weeks or something," I said. After several tastes during our annual blind tasting, we were laughing about it.

"No, I wasn't," she said.

"You totally were, dude," I said.

"You're so funny."

"It's cool. You were pregnant."

After Colton was born, Chari stopped working at the winery, for the most part. She stayed home with the boys while David did the day-to-day operations. I missed having her there. Chari and David are the perfect management duo, each compensating for the other's flaws. I felt the same way about the dynamic Allison and I had as a team.

My euphoria lasted a good two weeks, while I waited for a response, but then I wondered why David hadn't mentioned my proposal, yet. By the time two and a half weeks went by, I knew I had to be the one to bring it up.

"Hey, did you have a chance to look at my proposal?" I asked.

"Uh... ya... I need to find that," he said. "I had it in the car when I dropped Cade off that day and then I couldn't find it anywhere."

"I can print another one out for you if you want," I said. I knew Chari had been sick that week, and I didn't blame him for losing it, but I wished he would have said something sooner. Now, I would have to wait all over again.

"Okay, that would be good," he said. "Sorry about that."

"That's okay. I'll go get another copy right now," I said.

I rushed over to the point-of-sale computer and pulled up my proposal from my e-mail and printed another copy. I signed it at the bottom and stapled it shut, not having an envelope with me. After I gave him the second copy, I waited again. This time I only had to wait a week to get a response. The funny thing is, what satisfied me wasn't the actual financial offer.

"I need to meet with my accountant this week so we can put something together for you. I want to be sure Obama care isn't going to affect us and we need to look at our finances in general, so give me a week or so and I'll have something for you," he said.

"Okay, thanks," I said.

"Sorry it's taken a while, but we should know soon," he said.

"That's okay."

That is all I needed. The actual financial offer that came after was of little consequence to

me, somehow. What I needed was to be taken seriously, to be heard and to be valued, and David met all of those needs with his response. He wouldn't go to the trouble of meeting with his accountant if he hadn't planned on making me an offer. Of course, I did actually need the money or I would have had to quit the winery just to be able to make payments on my student loans, but in that moment I was more than satisfied. David valued me enough to consider my request, and I knew that whatever he offered would be a result of careful consideration.

Approval was the key to my happiness. I knew this about myself, because I'd always gotten such a rush of motivation from my professors and colleagues over the years when they showed appreciation for my work, from my boyfriends when I appreciated and embraced their interests, and from my parents when they were proud of me for an achievement. All of the anxiety and struggle over how much to ask for, and how to justify it, vanished because I knew David cared enough to keep me on. I wasn't unsure about my future anymore. Whatever the offer was, I would have an answer. My life could start. Ideally, that life would be filled with writing, spending quality time with Brandon and our dogs, and doing the work I still love as much as I did when I started at Su Vino. The key to happiness is doing what you love. A winemaker's life is the life for me.