

A letter to a pregnant woman

Pubs are so much different these days to the way they were seven years ago before I had my last drink. These days they encourage families to have a meal or celebrate special occasions by incorporating play areas for children into their interior design. Coffee and tea is available for those people who prefer not to drink and I guess all in all it's progress. It's far better than it was when only men were allowed in a pub and women spent many hours alone at home or waiting in the car with the kids. But for all of our progress in this quarter, there has been no progress in warning women about alcohol and pregnancy.

So when I saw you and your partner celebrating your friend's birthday with party poppers, laughter and what looks like an expensive bottle of wine I was tormented. Is it a contravention of a woman's civil liberties to advise her that drinking can harm her child? Or is it a contravention of the baby's not to? I glance at you again and I can see you've been drinking. You toast the birthday girl with red wine and a short speech. You're happy and everyone laughs at your funny discourse as your husband pats you gently on your large round tummy.

After what seems like hours of deliberating but is only minutes, I make a decision in favour of the baby and walk over to your table. My husband knows what I am thinking and grabs my hand silently asking if I know what I'm doing. I do – I think. My son and his fiancée watch me. And this is when we meet.

By writing this I wanted you to know what went on in my mind before I spoke to you – what I was thinking and how difficult it was to make the decision to walk over to you. I wanted you to know that I considered your feelings, your partner's feelings and your friends' feelings but none of that came close to the health of your baby. There really was never a time from the moment I saw you with a drink in your hand that I was not going to speak to you.

I sit down on an empty chair next to you and from the corner of my eye I can see my husband staring apprehensively at us, no doubt wondering if he would need to physically remove me from your table should you or your husband react badly to my message.

I say, 'Hello, my name is Elizabeth.' I pause and moisten my mouth, which has become suddenly dry. 'I wonder if anyone has mentioned to you that alcohol can be harmful to your baby,' I say, looking down at your tummy. You stare at me and I can see that you are considering whether you are in physical danger from me. Then you say quietly but with authority, 'My doctor said it was OK to have a few drinks!' I nod and reply, 'Doctors aren't giving a consistent message – in the United States they recommend abstinence.' From the corner of my other eye I see your partner stop talking and look over to us. I feel surrounded but hurry on. 'If you stop drinking now it will increase your chances of having a healthy baby.' Your partner moves closer and I say, 'Hi.' He nods back.

I smile at you both and before I move back to my own table I give you my telephone number. I tell you to ring me if you would like to talk to me. I also tell you I have more information if you want it. I leave – more nervous now than I was on the way over. I wonder what I have done, knowing all the while that if I truly believe in the title of my first book then I have done the right thing. Discussing this condition almost without exception will cause a disturbance but also without exception it will be a responsible one. I hope that you enjoy the rest of your pregnancy alcohol free and I hope that you don't worry too much.

I know that telling you not to worry after my earlier warning is next to futile, but I would much rather have spent nine months concerned about the health of my baby than knowing that my beautiful son's ability could have been protected by someone revealing to me one little truth, one little word – 'abstinence'.

As I walk back to my table, I can see the unease in my husband's eyes. He would rather I mind my own business, but he also knows that I can't – not with this issue anyway. He's a good man but doesn't like to ruffle feathers. God knows how he has managed in the last few years.

I glance back at your table and see you looking at me. I also see disquiet in your eyes and I'm sorry it's there. But it's better now than later. I hope that one day you will know somehow that my intentions were good and my information was accurate.

Goodbye and good luck.