



VIEWPOINT

In spirited defense

An uncle once set an intellectual trap for me that I have never forgotten. “So you say you’ll never drink?” he asked me. Aged 12, I nodded; I had decided to be a teetotaler early on in life. “Under no circumstances?” “No,” I said. “Even if your parents say you can drink?” My parents had never told me I couldn’t. “Even then,” I said. “Not even if your friends asked you?” “No,” I said. “Not even if you’re in the middle of a party and the only one not drinking, and everyone is drinking around you and telling you it would be rude not to drink?”

This gave me a pause. “If it was rude, I probably would,” I said.

He sat back and slapped his knee. “That’s where you’re wrong!” he roared. “If you’ve made up your mind on a point of principle, no one should ever be able to sway you.”

I had many occasions to revisit this conversation through my teetotalling youth. Through life as a college student surrounded by Baudelaire-reading libertines, then as a rookie journalist who went to parties to find people to talk about art and culture with, I developed an armour which—not unlike the alcoholic superhero Iron Man, funnily enough—I continually refined in order to keep ahead of the volley that awaits you at every gathering with a bar. These

Not indulging in that glass of wine comes with a tragic corollary—if you’re not a social drinker you have nothing else on which to blame your silliness, says SUPRIYA NAIR

tend to be places where people much too refined to ask you whether you have come to the party alone, or the label you are wearing, or even your last name, show no compunction in asking you why you aren’t drinking. The real answer was “I don’t feel like it,” but there was no way to say this and not be rude. Being rude, it was clear to me from an early age (and remains so), is much worse than having to insist that you do not need a drink.

From the legends of the death-dealing parties of the Assyrian king Sardanapalus, to the jewel-like consequentialism of *Vogue*’s own Dorothy Parker (I like to have a martini/Two at the very most/Three and I’m under the table/Four and I’m under the host), art and literature show us many ways to be drunk, but rather fewer examples of how to successfully avoid it. Many people fall back on the nervous old saw “I’m high on life!” which is embarrassing even when you say it ironically. After a brief run with that one, I experimented with ways to be elusive without outright lying. “I’m on my way to get one” was useful in the short term; “I’ll get one in a bit” had better staying power. Lies, on the other hand, only came with unwanted entanglements. “I’m on antibiotics” fooled few people but was marginally more effective than “I have to go back to work tonight.”

I am now old enough to go to parties expressly to avoid saying serious things. I still don’t drink if I don’t feel like it. But as you age, and get to know more people in your own profession—journalism in my case—the urge becomes more natural. (Surely, I say to the ghost of Mrs Parker, it is the merest coincidence that

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