

Dangerous When Wet Study Guide

Dangerous When Wet by Jamie Brickhouse

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Summary

Dangerous When Wet is a memoir of the life of Jamie Brickhouse who is an author and writer who lives in New York City. He is a gay man who lives in Manhattan with his life partner, Michael Hayes.

The story takes the reader back to Brickhouse's childhood in Beaumont, Texas. His parents were Jean and Earl Brickhouse. Jean had been a young widow with two sons, Jeffery and Ronny, when she met Earl and began dating him. They married soon after and settled in Beaumont. Jean, or Mama Jean as a friend of Jamie's dubbed her, was the driving force in Jamie's young life. She was demanding and narrow-minded and was not open to opinions other than her own.

Jamie was well-cared for on a physical level; however, it was a different matter on the emotional and psychological plane. Jamie and Jean hung out together every day until he started school. They would have lunch and go shopping and visit her girlfriends. She often told him that she loved him more than he could ever love her – a comment that stayed with Jamie into adulthood and which contributed to the guilt and shame that he finally had to deal with. When Jamie was about to start kindergarten, Jean told him that the kids will pretend to like him but none of them will love him like she did.

Jamie's parents liked to party and loved to drink. Alcohol was the focus of the family on many occasions – both formal and casual. They let the precocious five-year-old Jamie sip on alcoholic drinks and when he was fourteen actually ordered them for him. The teenage Jamie had many adult issues facing him. He began drinking heavily while in high school. He also realized that he was gay - something that he repressed for a number of years because Jean hated the gay lifestyle.

Eventually Jamie breaks free of Jean's physical presence, but her psychological and emotional hold on him lasted a lifetime – as did his addiction to alcohol. Jean begrudgingly came to terms with Jamie's homosexuality but she was strident in her advice that he get sober – with no recognition that it was she who gave him his first drink.

Jamie was on self-destruct throughout many years after he moved from the family home in conservative Beaumont, Texas, to New York City where anything goes. He lived a dangerous and unsafe lifestyle and could never get enough sex or booze to satisfy an emptiness that was always part of him.

After contracting the HIV virus, blackouts during alcoholic binges and a suicide attempt, he checked into rehab. Although he "recovered" he recognized that he was an alcoholic and that he would have to fight the allure of alcohol the rest of his life. He also admitted that he had to face the real Jamie who existed beneath the layers of repressed emotions, denials and delusion and who had been struggling to be liberated his entire life.



Part I: Golden Triangle (1968-1987), Part 1

Summary

Even as a young child, Jamie was drawn to the party life. He pictured himself holding a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He recalled the photos of his mother, Mama Jean, at her wedding. She was glamorous, a movie star to Jamie. Jamie's father was James Earl Sr., who was called "Bubba" by his family but not in front of Mama Jean. Mama Jean had been married to a man named Len after she graduated from Louisiana State University. She was a widow at 29 when Len died in a plane crash. Mama Jean met James Earl, or Earl as he was called, at her husband's funeral. They began dating shortly afterwards at the urging of Mamou, Mama Jean's mother. They eventually married and three years later had Jamie.

Mama Jean and Earl loved to dance and party. At five years old, Jamie took his first drink – just a sip of his father's drink. It tasted like being an adult. He recalled being terrified of being in water and hated being splashed. He had recurring nightmares about drowning. Mrs. Hammond, a neighbor, taught him how to swim before he went to kindergarten. Mrs. Hammond's teaching method was trial by water. She forced Jamie from the side of the pool that he was clinging to. It was sink or swim! Jamie tried to go inside the house one day to use the bathroom but Mrs. Hammond made him go outside on the ground. She "helped" him go. He did learn to swim that summer but experienced his first black out. By the next summer, he was afraid of water again.

Jamie sought the company of women over playing with kids his own age due to the adoration that he held for his mother. They grew close when they were constant companions before he started school. On Tuesdays they visited her beauty salon for her weekly hair appointment. They'd visit her friends who raved about Jamie's beautiful red hair and sweet personality. He listened intently to their conversations and learned the art of conversation. They'd visit Genevieve an older friend of Mama Jean's in the afternoon. She ultimately killed herself with a gun. Genevieve had been an alcoholic. It was a lot for Jamie at five years of age to grasp.

Although Mama Jean had warned Jamie that the kids at school and his teachers wouldn't like him as much as she did, he found that Mrs. Chambers, his teacher, was quite taken with him. Jamie also met his first boyfriend, Eric Munson, in first grade. While the other boys played dodge ball, they sat and discussed the latest episode of the TV sit-com Bewitched. They would pass love notes and talk on the phone at night. Jamie would emulate his mother and the women on the soap operas they watched, filing his nails as he cradled the phone on his shoulder.

Jamie would stay after school whenever he could to help Mrs. Chambers. One evening Mrs. Chambers asked if Jamie knew what the word "sissy" meant. She thought that Eric



might be a sissy and that Jamie would turn into one if he hung around with him. Jamie cut his ties with Eric immediately.

In junior high Jamie understood what Mrs. Chambers was telling him. Eric was a sissy - but Jamie was, too.

When he was 11, Jamie and Mama Jean were shopping for Cadillacs. A few years before the family had moved from a small ranch style house to a larger house in a better neighborhood. Mama Jean began a real estate career when Jamie was in the first grade. Earl didn't want Jean to work. He was the director of the Chamber of Commerce's Convention and Visitor's Bureau. He officially greeted important visitors to Beaumont.

The first job Jean took was with the Southeast Texas Art Council where a realtor recruited her to work in the PR department of American Real Estate. She eventually got her real estate license and went into sales. She worked late hours forcing Earl to become more domestic. There was an article in the style section of the local newspaper about their modern marriage, their role reversal. Jamie was proud of her success and called her Executive Woman. He brought her to career day at school. She surprised Earl and Jamie one night by pulling up in the driveway a new Pontiac Bonneville.

Jamie's brothers filled Jamie in on the day Mama Jean pulled him through the window and fled in her car. She had bought a new Mercury Marquis that Earl wasn't very happy about. He got drunk and Jean fled with the boys to her mother's house. A new billboard in the neighborhood had Jean's face with the boast that she was a "million-dollar producer."

Jean began to struggle with her aging face and thickening torso. A pantsuit that she tried on didn't fit. She curled up on the bed and sucked her thumb – something she did when things went wrong. She and Earl would fight over her childish habit. They never tried to hide their fighting from Jamie. Jamie would wind up in tears asking why they didn't just get a divorce. They ultimately officially separated. Earl was staying at a motel; Jean was looking at a townhouse to buy. Jamie thought the divorce would be glamorous like the movie stars.

Jamie would help Jean find gray hairs in her dark hair and pull them "from the root." She lamented about ever marrying Earl. But she was glad she did because she had Jamie. She couldn't live without Jamie.

Analysis

In this section, the author establishes the dynamics of the Brickhouse family and an overview of Jamie's childhood. His mother, Mama Jean, is portrayed as dominant and demanding and critical. She has set ideas and is closed to opinions that don't align with hers. Jamie's childhood set the stage for a life of alcoholism. Perhaps he was vulnerable to alcohol and would have become an alcoholic even if his parents were teetotalers. His parents like to party and go out on the town and alcohol was always



center stage. Jamie envisioned himself with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

Jamie learned to suppress his real feelings and real self at a very young age. He was precocious and bright beyond his physical age, but he was still a little boy. He had feminine traits very young and would rather hang around with his mother's friends than his own. He was traumatized by a swimming teacher who grabbed his penis to "help" him urinate. His favorite teacher at school cautioned him against hanging around with sissies because he might become one.

Jamie's father was supportive of him but in a sense abandoned him. He catered to the strong will of his wife and did little to intercede when Mama Jean unfairly criticized their son and pushed him to become what she wanted him to become. When Jean's career as a real estate agent and then as a stockbroker took off, she brought in way more income than Earl did. It was another point of contention between them and she brought up their earnings disparity whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Vocabulary

mewling, habitués, nostalgic, caballero, fatalistic, diaphanous , pragmatic, finesse, guileless, halcyon



Part I: Golden Triangle (1968 – 1987), Part 2

Summary

At 14, Jamie sat at the Russian Tea Room in New York City with his parents. Jean ordered a champagne cocktail for Jamie and herself. Earl took a vodka martini. Jamie had wanted to go to New York with his drama club on Easter-break but Jean talked him into going with her and Earl. Mama Jean had switched from real estate salesman to Wall Street stockbroker. She and Earl patched up their differences during her training in New York.

Jamie began taking sips of alcoholic drinks on a regular basis. He had found new friends in the drama club he joined. He began seeing Nicole, a member of the club who was aggressive like his mother. Hunter and Jamie both wanted to be actors. The first time Jamie got drunk was with Nicole and Hunter. They hit the Amaretto and Crème de menthe when his parents were gone.

Being in New York, Jamie felt he found where he belonged. Earl made a toast to Jamie hoping that he'd be on stage someday. Mama Jean immediately put down the idea, opining that the life of an actor was a hard one. She referred to a gay dancer and his partner as leading a sad life. Just a week before Jamie sat in the bathtub crying because he admitted to himself that he was gay. He worried what that reality would do to his mother. But any tension he had was eased after the second champagne cocktail.

On another vacation in Acapulco, Jamie expanded his alcoholic intake to include salted margaritas and pina coladas. His older half-brother Jeffery was on the trip with the family. He had announced four years before that he was gay. Jamie was much closer to Jeffery than Jeffery was to his full brother, Ronny. Jeffery was Jamie's best friend and inspiration. When Jamie was 12, Jeffery left home with his boyfriend to live in Houston. Mama Jean sobbed over his departure and his gayness. She asked Jamie if he had homosexual feelings. If he did, she would take him to a psychiatrist. Jamie knew he was gay but responded that he wasn't.

Jamie was aware of the promiscuous lifestyle that many gay men lead. But he looked forward to that life, a lifestyle that disgusted his mother. There were reports about a gay cancer that was spreading in the homosexual community. Jamie wandered off alone to the adult pool where he spotted two gay men, one of whom was giving Jamie the eye. He connected with them and got their room number. Jamie sneaked out the hotel room he was sharing with Jeffery and went to the gay men's room. He had his first gay encounter with both men but there was no penetration. Jamie was shocked when he found fifty dollars had been stuck down in his pocket. They thought he was a whore! He walked back to their room and stuck the money under the door.



Liquor was harmless, Jamie concluded; it allowed Jamie to relax and have fun. Jamie had always been intrigued by martinis and concocted some for himself. He thought they'd make him sophisticated. With his parents away he'd make up a pitcher of martinis and float naked in the backyard pool. The Neches River Festival was the highlight of the summer. Jamie loved dressing up for the event.

After the dance, Jamie drove down to the Copa, a gay bar. He danced each dance with a different gay man. One of the men invited Jamie back to his apartment. Jamie had sex with him. A few weeks later, Jamie began finding blood in the toilet after bowel movements. He discovered a rash of little fleshy moles. He thought they'd go away but they were growing. He made an appointment to see Dr. Faudi, the only proctologist in Beaumont. Jamie had anal warts and confessed to the doctor that he had anal sex with a man. He'd have to tell his parents that he had anal warts because they would require surgical removal. The doctor kept the cause of the warts from Jamie's parents but they seemed to be suspicious.

Maggie had driven Jamie home after a dance because he was so drunk. Mama Jean warned him the next day to watch his drinking. Alcoholism ran in his family. He promised that he'd learned his lesson. Mama Jean scolded Jamie because she could never get ahold of him during his freshman year at Trinity University. Trinity was referred to as the Ivy League of the Southwest. It was rumored to be thirty percent gay. He enrolled in a playwriting class and had the full support of his parents.

Over the phone, Mama Jean asked if Jamie had homosexual tendencies. She freaked out when he admitted that he did. Later, Earl claimed it was he who asked Jamie the question. He told his son to be careful.

But Jamie wasn't careful; he dove deeply into partying, drinking, drugs and the gay life. In an attempt to ease Mama Jean's concerns, he told her that his boyfriend, Michael Parker, was a conservative intellect. Their relationship fizzled after only a few weeks. Jamie spent the summer at home in Beaumont. Tensions were high with Mama Jean expressing her disgust over the gay lifestyle. She told him she wouldn't pay for his school if he decided to take acting. He decided to audition for plays at school but major in communications and journalism to assuage his mother's concerns. He had three needs in life: booze, sex and his mother's love. The three were sure to collide someday and in dramatic fashion.

Analysis

Jamie is being placed on a trajectory that will lead him to alcoholism. This section is a lesson to any parent who might consider giving a child alcohol. Not only can the child develop a taste for alcohol, he will drink it down with their blessing. When a parent sanctions the use by a child of alcohol and makes it appear glamorous and sophisticated like Jamie's parents did, it sends a message that it's completely acceptable and safe. Since parents are supposed to protect their children, surely alcohol is not dangerous or a young person's parents wouldn't be supplying it to them.



There are all kinds of twisted and confused messages that are sent to a child in such circumstances.

This section describes Jamie's early use of alcohol and his recognition that he is homosexual. It was undoubtedly a lot to handle for a young man who literally cannot talk to his parents about any of it. Jamie found alcohol to be an escape – it allowed him to relax and feel liberated. The reality of course was that he was being imprisoned by his alcoholic consumption.

Like many parents, Jean and Earl Brickhouse either avoided facing reality about their son's drinking problem that escalated during his final years in high school or they were unaware of it. The latter excuse does not hold water.

Vocabulary

mewling, habitués, nostalgic, caballero, fatalistic, diaphanous , pragmatic, finesse, guileless, halcyon



Part II: Mr. Golightly (1990 – 2006), Part 1

Summary

After graduation, Jamie moved to New York where he had always wanted to live. He shared an apartment in Manhattan with his boyfriend, Michael Hayes. They both enjoyed throwing big parties and inviting all kinds of characters. Jamie had met Michael shortly after moving to New York to pursue a career in publishing. They had met in Central Park at a site that was notorious for gay hook-ups. Michael had been looking for the love of his life and said he found him. It was the first serious relationship for Jamie since Michael Parker. Hayes and Jamie both drank too much.

Mama Jean and Earl met Michael Hayes. She seemed to be skeptical that it was a serious romance. However, she claimed to have come a long way in accepting Jamie's gayness. When Jamie returned to the table where they were meeting, Jean was in tears. She was expressing her hope that they were "careful." Jamie assured her that they were safe. Jean got Jamie aside and told him that she liked Michael.

Christmas was Mama Jean's favorite time of the year. She was generous in her gift giving, loved to decorate and hosted a big party each year. Jamie and Michael were invited for Thanksgiving but only Jamie was invited for Christmas. Jamie made an excuse and left the house one evening. He got drunk and wound up in a motel with a young man. He had meant to come home by midnight but had fallen asleep. It was morning so he hurried home hoping his mother was still sleeping. However, she had just read his journal about the trip that he and Michael took to Europe detailing the bathhouses and drinking and a huge fight he had with Michael in Zurich.

Jamie and Michael stayed with Lars in Zurich. Lars was an ex-lover of Michael's and had gone straight with a new girlfriend. Jamie and Michael were looking forward to visiting Zurich's gay scene and hooking up at a bathhouse for a threesome. They found an attractive man named Felix in a gay bar. Jamie and Michael got into an argument over Felix. Jamie admitted that he was thinking about breaking up with Michael. He didn't love him any longer. They got very loud and were thrown out of the bar they were in.

Later, Jamie recognized that his drunkenness along with his desire for Felix had led him astray. He wanted to stay with Michael and still loved him. After reading about the fight and Jamie's drinking and use of recreational drugs like Ecstasy, Jean had reason to be concerned. She warned him to stop his use of drugs. So when Jamie returned after the all-nighter, Jean was very upset. She'd been up all night worried about him. She told him he needed a psychiatrist and that she felt sorry for Michael.

Back in New York, if Jamie had no luck at the Works gay bar, he'd stop by Les Hommes Bookstore – which wasn't a book store but a gay porn shop for quickie gay sex. It was \$8 to enter the shop's back room where the buddy-booths were located. On one



occasion, he opened the door to a dark room where a well-endowed dwarf was waiting. Jamie had never had a dwarf and decided to give the guy a tumble.

Michael Parker moved to New York from Los Angeles and stayed with Jamie and Michael Hayes until his boyfriend joined him to look for an apartment. Jamie took Parker to every bar and joint he frequented. They both admired Peggy Lee's message contained in the song, "Is That All There Is?" And they lived by the lyric, "Break out the booze and have a ball." Jamie's life wasn't satisfying any longer. He wanted more.

Jamie had become associate director of publicity at a major commercial publishing house. His boss, Jack, was also gay and the perfect mentor for Jamie. Mama Jean planned to attend a promotional party for Joan Collins's memoir. She scolded Jamie for getting so drunk at the party. She was worried about him; she feared he was an alcoholic. Jamie was shaken when Jack committed himself to rehab. Jamie wondered if he was next.

Jamie had always wanted a fur coat and spotted a black Persian-lamb coat at a flea market. He wore his new coat when he met Michael Parker. After a few drinks Parker decided to go home but Jamie continued on, visiting gay bars and drinking heavily. At one of his stops, he spent a good deal of time in the men's room snorting cocaine. Someone stole his coat that he left on his chair during one of his absences.

Jamie met John at the aptly named Cock, a gay hook-up place on the Lower East Side. Back at John's apartment, Jamie noticed a number of books about the Catholic church, sex and celibacy. John was a practicing Catholic and a "lapsed" priest. He was getting his master's degree on sexuality and the Catholic Church at Fordham. He had been a priest for 14 years and was celibate all that time. He noted that Jamie had been very drunk the night before.

Jamie and Michael had decided long before to have an open marriage because they both desired the excitement of other men. Jamie had broken their always come home rule. He was always too drunk to try to find his way home. Jamie carried on a sexual affair with John for several months. Jamie hadn't seen John for a while when he called to say that he had gonorrhea. Jamie promised to see a doctor.

Analysis

The stresses of life with Jamie is catching up to the laid-back easy-going Michael. Jamie is getting into recreational drugs and his philandering with other men is finally riling Michael up. But Jamie is too into himself and to what he wants and he learned his narcissist ways from a pro. Jean taught Jamie, by example, to put his own needs and desires first and that everyone else just has to fall in line.

But how long can Michael take it? Jamie says some cruel things to Michael that he may regret. He tells his partner of many years that he doesn't love him anymore and had been thinking of breaking up with him. Jamie is getting back at Jean for all the injustice he was made to endure at the hand of his mother. It's misdirected anger that is driving



Jamie. While Jamie is upset that Michael is complaining about the choices he is making, Jamie isn't upset that Jean snooped around his apartment and found a diary containing all the revelations. He learned long ago to shield her from any blame. It has been ingrained in him and is a difficult lesson to unlearn.

Jamie's life is spinning out of control. He is visiting every rat hole in town and even smokes crack one night with some degenerate.

Vocabulary

cavalcade, impenetrable, symmetry, haute couture, exuberance, provenance, verboten, adamantly, termagant, mantra, assignations, impromptu, subterranean, touché, supplication, mesmerized, fatalistic, sauntered, copious



Part II: Mr. Golightly (1990-2006), Part 2

Summary

Jamie returned to the publishing world as a vice president and executive director of publicity at a high profile publisher of non-fiction. He and his boss, Liz, had been out with colleagues one night when Jamie revealed that he had given up drinking for Lent. It didn't take much convincing for him to abandon his vow. But the next day he was back on his Lenten sacrifice.

One night after work he was doing cocaine with four young guys. When he returned from the restroom, they were gone and so was his wallet. He had a little cocaine left and picked up a guy with promises of sex and getting high. But when the guy discovered that Jamie had only a tiny bit of cocaine, he was outraged and left Jamie in a snit. He wasn't even gay.

Jamie was at a breaking point. He called his former boss, Jack, who had remained sober. Jamie laid off alcohol for the next several days and attended a sobriety meeting with Jack. The alcoholics shared their stories with one another. Jamie could relate to many of them. Mama Jean was thrilled to learn that Jamie was taking steps to get sober. He also shared the news with Liz who was supportive.

On vacation with Michael in the Caribbean, Jamie went off the wagon. He deluded himself into believing he'd return to sobriety when they returned home. He resumed attendance at the meetings but the urge to drink was strong. He began to drink before and after these meetings. His drinking was impacting his work. He and Michael went on another vacation to Rio. He knew he would drink but promised himself to get sober for real when he returned.

A few nights into the trip, he woke up in a strange apartment. His memories of the night before were sketchy – a bevy of gorgeous gay men, cocaine and an ATM. Fernando, whose apartment he had stayed at, told Jamie that he'd been so drunk that he brought him back to his place to sleep. His life was being filled with indiscretions. In Rio Jamie decided he could never have as much fun sober than he did when he was drunk.

At La Hommes one night, Jamie tried smoking crack. A young blond friend he met there guided him through the steps of inhaling the drug from a crack pipe. They went to the guy's apartment which was a filthy one-room walk-up. They stripped and sank into the dirty bed, watch porn on TV and smoked the last of the crack.

Jean came to stay a few days at the new apartment that Jamie and Michael bought in Chelsea. Jean was upset that Jamie was drinking again. He assured her that he had things under control. Jean helped them with the down payment which Jamie was repaying on a monthly basis. He put off for a while telling Jean that they were not coming for Thanksgiving. They were going to a wedding in Mexico. He made sure he



had a few drinks under his belt before he told her. Jean was hurt and angry and tried to inflict a guilt trip on Jamie. Jean stopped speaking to Jamie.

Jamie woke up in Paterson, New Jersey, one morning unaware of how he got there. There was a Hispanic man, Manuel, sitting across the room conducting a conversation in Spanish on the phone. Jamie's recollections were scanty. He recalled meeting three Latino guys near his apartment. He was drunk and agreed to go home with them. His Latino host insisted on driving him home after a tour of Paterson. Manuel was proud to show Jamie the Great Falls up close and took a photo of Jamie standing there. All Jamie wanted to do was get home and make amends to Michael. Manuel gave Jamie his phone number and told him to call him.

On a visit to New York, Jean asked Jamie what barebacking was. Jamie cringed but explained that it was having sex without a condom. Jean asked Michael if he'd been barebacking lately. Jean thought it was funny but Michael didn't. Jamie changed the subject. Jamie had been keeping a secret. After John called telling Jamie he had the clap, Jamie saw his doctor. He didn't have gonorrhea but he was HIV positive. The doctor explained that the condition was manageable at this point. Jamie was devastated. How many years did he have left? Would he be on the pills that caused sunken-face syndrome? He needed a drink.

Jamie hooked up with a man in the Last Chance Saloon. He broke down and told him about his diagnosis and that no one would ever have sex with him again. The man had sex with him at Les Hommes. Jamie didn't stay long. He went home and told Michael who tried to comfort him as he sobbed.

Liz discussed the near collapse of Jamie's publicity department. Morale was terrible because Jamie played favorites with Jason, an attractive young gay man. When Jamie promoted Jason, two veteran staff members resigned. One of the departing staff members blasted Jamie in her exit interview with the CEO. Liz advised him to hire good people and get the department back on track. She also advised him to take care of his drinking problem. The CEO wouldn't tolerate an alcoholic in his organization. Liz faced her own problems a short while later. She was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer, a deadly form of the disease. The news made Jamie drink even more. He hated that his friend was suffering from a condition that was nearly always fatal. She may not be around much longer to shield him from being fired.

Jamie lost it at a party held by Michael Parker. He drank too much, cried hysterically about Liz and bit Jason on the neck. He remembered very little of it. He was hung over most every day. JoAnn, Liz's deputy director, approached Jamie about being absent so much. It became routine for him to have two vodka screwdrivers before work. He never saw Liz again. She succumbed to the cancer and never returned to work. One day after he drank his lunch, Jamie got word that the CEO wanted to see him. Jamie knew what was coming – he was terminated.

Jamie became suicidal after Liz's death and the termination from his job. He recalled how so many years before Mama Jean had told him about her alcoholic friend,



Genevieve, who had killed herself. When Jamie was 26, a writer he admired had overdosed. He had his own Genevieve. He was depressed and sinking deeply into self-loathing. In an attempt to sleep longer and better, he began taking Ambien. He began drinking more, hangovers were more intense and he never wanted to get up. He got another job but he drank more than ever, coming in late and missing days. After his new boss confronted him about his behavior, he took a whole bottle of Ambien.

Analysis

Jamie's lack of restraint and caution in his insatiable pursuit of gay sex leads him to a very dangerous place. Ironically, it is an affair with a Catholic priest that portends a potentially lethal outcome. Father John as he called the priest contacted Jamie after they stopped seeing each other. The priest had contracted gonorrhea and advised Jamie to see a doctor to get checked out. The doctor learns that Jamie does not have gonorrhea but that he tested positive for the HIV virus which is the precursor of the deadly AIDS disease. Liz, his boss and good friend, is diagnosed with deadly ovarian cancer. She struggles to stay alive while he apparently doesn't care if he throws his life away.

Jamie is naturally devastated by the news. He wonders how much time he has left. But the doctor insists that the virus is manageable in its current state. It seems that the old adage was true for Jamie that good or bad things come in threes. He learned that he was HIV positive, he lost his job and lost Liz, his boss and one of his best friends. He was in such fragile state emotionally and physically that he was unable to cope with the reality of his life and the real tragedy that had become part of it.

Jamie's drinking was threatening the job he was able to get after being let go from his last position. He was absent all the time. When he sent a message to his boss that he would be out again, she wrote back, "Again??" That one word triggered something deep within him; he took a whole bottle of Ambien hoping that he'd never see the light of day again.

Vocabulary

incorrigible, beatific, sordid, anemic, penultimate, protocol, sordid, pallid, ethereal, calamitous, doppelganger, defenestration, miasma



Part III: Palm Springs Follies (2006)

Summary

Jean came to rescue Jamie after his trip to the emergency room to have his stomach pumped. She was emotional and devastated; she did not get into “I told you so” mode. She had been in town for a while before she could see him. He was locked away in a detox unit at the hospital where he could receive no visitors. Many of the people he was locked up had been through the process before; some had been there multiple times.

Upon his release, Jean had called on some of Jamie’s girlfriends from college, two of whom were psychologists. Janine felt he was in the third stage of alcoholism and needed to undergo intense treatment. He selected Michael's House in Palm Springs for his treatment. Mama Jean would be covering the \$16,000 fee. Had Jamie indicated he was still suicidal after his release from detox, insurance would have paid for it.

Jamie fantasized about drinking himself into oblivion before he started the treatment but Janine told him that he’d be refused entry into the program if he showed up drunk. Debbie, his new boss, was supportive. She told him to take as long as he needed to get better. His job was waiting for him. Before she left for the airport, Mama Jean told him how scared she had been. He must face reality – he can never drink again.

Jamie convinced the coach at the treatment center to allow him to run laps instead of playing baseball with his fellow albies. He was three weeks into rehab and surprised he made it through the first horrible day. He felt he was being processed for prison time. Jamie was told he could not drink, of course, and could not engage in any sexual activity. The other twenty men were straight and in their twenties so sex was a moot issue for Jamie. Jamie was ready to get sober. Each day everyone had to attend group therapy and describe their current emotions. Jamie shared his story with the group – gay from birth and recently tried to commit suicide. One afternoon there was a discussion of homosexuality – several of the men didn’t understand it. The discussion made Jamie angry. He wasn’t there to “fix” his sexuality; he was there to get sober.

After a week of isolation from the outside world, Jamie was able to talk on the phone to Mama Jean and Earl. He avoided talk about pill addiction but did tell them about the group therapy sessions. He mentioned that his roommate Chris used to consume cases of Coors Light everyday and that he was obsessed with Katie Couric, pictures of her were all over the walls. Jean expressed her concern with the multiple rehabs that many of the patients had been through.

Jamie got into the daily routine that was structured and unvarying. His only contact with addiction was cigarette smoking. The patients could go on buddy trips to town but were not allowed to travel alone. Jamie enjoyed these brief encounters with the outside world. Jamie was surprised that he found rehab better than he imagined. He felt liberated and free to think about himself free of outside pressures. He had time to face the guilt he felt



about Liz and how he'd tried to throw away what Liz had fought to save. She was his patron saint.

Jamie had quit going to mass after he went away to school. Jean's attendance also slacked off much to the consternation of the devout Earl. Jean told Jamie that Earl was upset that Jamie had left the church. She told him that it was her faith not the Church that had gotten her through the dark times. Never lose your faith, she had told him. So many years later, he prayed for the first time, asking Liz for her forgiveness and help. He admitted to himself that he was an alcoholic.

Jamie had time to think about his relationship with Michael and whether it was the right one for him. Michael came to the rehab center for a visit. They saw a live show in town and attended a twelve-step program. Michael participated in the meeting and shared his experiences of living with an alcoholic and finding him unconscious after overdosing. They talked privately to Dave who had concluded that Mama Jean had a vice grip on Jamie even from a thousand miles away. And she describes as deviant any behavior that is unlike her own. She had faulted Michael for Jamie becoming a Democrat as if it were a sin. She had always blamed someone else for Jamie's behavior.

Jamie believed that Michael loved him. Now he had to love him back as much. Jamie was experiencing guilt over trying to kill himself. He had to forgive himself, get over the shame and move on. Jean may have treated him differently because he was gifted. During the goodbye ceremony the inmates Jamie left behind wrote notes of inspiration and good wishes. Counselors described his progress. Dave told him the first step was to forgive himself. Jamie was feeling good when he left knowing that the next phase of alcoholism was relapse.

Analysis

Although Jean had been the biggest thorn in Jamie's life all his life, in this segment she shows her love for him. As soon as she heard that he had been hospitalized after trying to end his life, she was on the next plane. Of course, she probably figured no one else other than she would be able to handle the situation and rescue her son. She also gladly wrote out the \$16,000 check for his rehab. She wanted Jamie to recover and live more than anything. What may have been driving her was her feeling that she failed with the other two sons. Jeffery was gay and stayed his distance from her. Ronny was awkward socially and not a son that she was especially proud of. Jamie was a publicist and budding writer who lived in Manhattan. He had all the trappings of the elite life. She felt she had to fix him!

After he survived the suicide attempt, Jamie was really frightened. He forced himself to look in the mirror. He wanted to live. He had people who cared about him and who he cared about. He loved life and was determined to recover. He knew that alcoholism was the largest stumbling block to his survival.



This was a pivotal time for Jamie. He had many things to consider. The most pressing matter was whether he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Michael. When Michael shows up at the rehab center to visit Jamie for the first time he spoke openly on just how difficult it had been to live with Jamie and how devastated he was when he found him unconscious. Yet Michael stood by his side; he realized that Michael really did love him.

Vocabulary

pubescence, euphoric, voila, carcinogenic, peripheral, endorphin, missives, beatific, vacillated



Part IV: The Hair Is the Last to Go (2008-2011)

Summary

Jean and Earl stayed with Jamie and Michael for a few days before they left on a cruise. She had begun doing her own hair because she claimed the hairdresser kept messing up her appointment times. But Earl said it was Jean who was getting confused. Jean was still unable to get over Jamie's suicide attempt. She was telling the story to everyone she knew around Beaumont. Jamie still suffered from guilt, shame and, most of all, alcoholism. Jamie attended therapy sessions after his return.

Jamie attended sobriety meetings every day. At one meeting he left early and went to a bar across the street. He got drunk which eased his pain. He went back on the wagon the next day. Seven months later he was in the same spot but shared his desire for a drink with the group which blunted the lure. He wasn't cured and he got drunk. He sobered up and returned to the meetings. He went off again and was drunk for seven months. He became a secret drinker. Alcoholism is one of the few diseases that causes shame and guilt. Anorexia has a similar reaction. Many times alcoholics drink more during relapses trying to capture that initial joy of drinking experienced years before. No one knew he was in relapse.

Jean was showing signs of being "elderly." She rammed her car into the building where she played bridge. She was racking up incidents that could have been blamed on being drunk – be she was sober. The financial economic crash of 2008, she lost a small fortune. Earl had told her to move the money but she refused. She cut down on her Christmas party and limited decorations. Jamie was sober at Christmas that year and enjoyed being Santa for once. Jean couldn't afford the expensive gifts she normally bought.

When Jamie returned to New York, he met an old lover at 21. He knew he would drink and decided to start is sober day count again afterwards. He was looking more forward to drinking than to seeing his old friend and began on the plane back home. The old friend cancelled and Jamie, somewhat relieved, began his climb back to sobriety. Jean was having more problems. She had another incident in which she smashed into a light pole. But that wasn't the worst part – she drove without pants. Jean began hallucinating and becoming paranoid. Earl and Jeffery had her committed temporarily.

Earl had hoped that she'd snap out of whatever was going on with her when Jamie visited. However, nothing changed. She refused to even hug him. She thought the real Jamie had been killed in a car crash. Jamie was upset about his mother's condition but managed to resist the temptation to drink. He had stayed sober 14 months. She was moved into a nursing home Near Beaumont. She had to be fed and spent most of her time with her eyes closed.



Jean was diagnosed with LBD or Lewy body dementia which causes paranoia and hallucinations. Patients with LBD also have spatial perception problems and often fall. Her condition declined rapidly. She didn't want to eat. She was dying and placed in a hospice. Even though Jamie knew it was coming, he was devastated by the news. Jamie talked to Earl about a visit. He had started his own hospice at home. He had cancer and it had spread.

Jamie wondered who would miss her the most. Earl would have the biggest void in his life. As he put it, "Who's gonna tell me what to do?" Jean and Jeffery had a combative relationship; Jeffery didn't cave to her every whim. Ronny was a loner and didn't have many people in his life; he may miss her the most. Jamie had been under her control and impacted by her for so long but he had carved out his own life.

When Jean passed away, Jamie was just two weeks shy of staying sober an entire year. He had his mother to thank for that. When he visited her in the hospital after her behavior had become bizarre and said goodbye she made him promise that he'd never drink again.

Jamie attained three years of sobriety. His life had returned to him and was in an improved state. He had plans to attend an auction of items from the estate of Joan Crawford and a preview of Elizabeth Taylor's jewels to be auctioned at Christie's that afternoon. He purchased a fur scarf from the Crawford collection for \$500. Viewing the vast collection of Taylor's jewels, clothing, art and personal items made Jamie sad – it all reminded him of Jean.

Jean had always told Jamie that he should be a writer. After her death, he began writing articles for Michael Parker's travel magazine. Subsequently, that led to Jamie deciding to write a memoir about his mother, his family and his life. He recognized that he would have never become a writer had he not gotten sober. He recognized that he would always be an alcoholic and had to be prepared to fight against its allure. Alcohol had consumed him and had diminished life rather than enhanced it. Jamie was finally becoming the person that Jean wanted him to be but she never lived to see it.

Even in his darkest hour, he never fell out of love with New York. Even Jean had told him that New York was where he belonged. Jamie's doctor was right when he told Jamie that having the HIV virus was manageable. But dealing with the shame and stigma of having it was a different challenge. One person who loved him no matter what others felt about him was Jean. Although she criticized and nagged him, she loved him unconditionally. He hoped that she realized that he loved her the same way and just as much as she did. He was glad he never told her that he was HIV positive. She would have never gotten over the worry. He obeyed another demand of Mama Jean's. She told him that he should write but not to write about her until after she's gone.



Analysis

Jamie has survived his self-destructive past. He is enjoying life and has been sober for three years. However, he knows that the recovery is fragile and that it could all come crashing down around him. Jamie has resolved a lot about his mother and her influence on him. He avoided taking on more guilt by having come to terms with her before she died. This section describes her decline and ultimate death. It was ironic that someone as articulate and sharp-minded as Jean would succumb to a form of dementia that left her staring into space with very little to say. Jamie is showing positive signs that his addiction is under control. He avoids meeting an old friend who he knows will want to drink with him. He decided to stay home and stay sober.

Jamie's relationship with Michael has improved and has lasted so far. One thing that Jamie never regretted was his love affair with New York City. It was perhaps the one decision he made that turned out good for him and that he didn't regret. He recognizes that the fight to stay sober is a life-long one and feels that he is up for the challenge.

Jamie's mother always told him that she loved him more than anyone did. He has fond memories of Jean now and in the end feels that no one loved her more than he did.

Vocabulary

cataclysmic, homage, mortification, futilely, pristine, vestigial, rhetorical, ubiquitous, gaucherie, superfluous



Important People

Jamie Brickhouse

Jamie Brickhouse writes about his life growing up in Beaumont, Texas, a port city in the southeastern part of the state where he never felt he belonged. He had a particularly close relationship with his mother, Jean. In fact, years later he realized that it was too close. She took care of physically as any good parent does. But she wanted Jamie to herself. She told him that she loved him more than anyone else ever could.

Jamie was a bright young boy and like all gifted children, he was probably judged to be older, more mature than his biological age and was able to venture on the adult side of life at times. When he was just five he had his first sip of alcohol. He liked it; the problem was he never stopped liking it. At 14 his parents were ordering alcoholic drinks for him. Not surprisingly, Jamie became an alcoholic during his teen years. His parents loved him and didn't intentionally ruin his life, but they are responsible for introducing him to alcohol and giving him their imprimatur to the consumption of booze.

Jamie realized he was gay when he was fourteen. He never had a problem with being gay – he didn't go through an identity crisis or angst over his sexual orientation. But he was smart enough to know that he had to keep it from his domineering mother who found the lifestyle disgusting. He was made to repress many feelings and realities for many years; he drank to blur his inner turmoil but, of course, it only made it worse.

Jamie did recover and has stayed sober for three years. But he knows that alcoholism is a problem he will have to deal with his whole life. He writes: "My alcoholism is the sea, always rushing toward me." And just like the sea, there will be calm waters ahead as well as unforgiving tsunamis.

Mama Jean

Jean Brickhouse was Jamie's mother. She was an aggressive, opinionated woman who was domineering and not open to opinions that did not align with her own. She was married to a man name Len who was in the Air Force. They moved around a lot for his various assignments. They had two sons, Jeffery and Ronny. Len was killed on a mission when his jet crashed. At his funeral she became reacquainted with a man named Earl Brickman. They began dating and soon married. They had one child, Jamie, a son.

Jean was disgusted by the gay lifestyle. She was devastated when her eldest son, Jeffery came out and moved with his boyfriend to Houston. Although she didn't vocalize it, she probably felt she had failed – so her tears were for herself as much as they were for Jeffery. She was frightened that Jamie might have the same tendencies. She asked him one day when he was 14 if he had gay tendencies. She was well aware that she



detested the gay lifestyle so he answered no even though he knew he was gay. She told him that if he had the tendencies she would take him to a psychiatrist.

Jean was an aggressive and smart woman. After being a mother and housewife, she ventured into the work force beginning as office help at a real estate agency. But Jean was too smart and too eager to make good money to stay in a lowly position very long. She got her real estate license and became one of the realty's top salesmen. She went on to become a stock broker and made great money. She was the breadwinner of her family - a position she enjoyed.

Jean's controlling personality and her dominance over Jamie's was part of what drove him to alcoholism. Jean and Earl allowed Jamie to drink underage, which was not only illegal but also allowed him to acquire a taste for alcohol that lasted all his life.

Earl Brickhouse

Earl Brickhouse was Jamie's father. He loved Jean despite her controlling ways and short-fuse. He was often the target of her rage just because he was there. But he was easy going and was magnanimous in his understanding that she had an innate need to control and dominate the household. Earl was stronger than Jean in that he didn't have to prove it. His nickname was Bubba but no one dared call him that in front of Jean. He met Jean at her first husband's funeral. They began dated a short time later, married and had one son, Jamie.

Liz

Liz was Jamie's boss at a boutique publicity firm. They were very close and understood each other. She was not judgmental about his lifestyle. She enjoyed a quiet life with her life-partner, Karen. Liz knew that Jamie had problems and always offered supportive and positive advice. Jamie was devastated when Liz was suddenly taken ill with ovarian cancer. After her diagnosis, she didn't last very long. A few years later, when Jamie tried to kill himself he felt he had betrayed Liz. She had been trying to hang on to life and he tried to throw his away.

Michael Hayes

Michael Hayes was Jamie's partner in life. They shared an upscale apartment in Manhattan. He was from Tennessee and had a thick southern accent. When he said his name, he pronounced it quickly in his southern drawl and it came out Michahaze – which is what Jamie called him. Jamie was the dominant partner with Michael the more passive one. He put up with a lot with Michael which came out when he visited Jamie in rehab. Guests were allowed to share their stories about their loved ones who were patients there. Only then did he vent and tell the group how difficult it had been to put up with Jamie and his sexcapades with others. Finding him unconscious from an overdose was the worst day of his life. Jamie felt closer to Michael after that.



Len

Len was Mama Jean's first husband. He was in the Air Force when she met him. The couple moved around quite a bit while he was in the service. They had two sons, Jeffery and Ronny. He died on a mission when his plane crashed.

Jeffery

Jeffery is Jamie Brickhouse's half-brother. Jean was married before she married Jamie's father. Her husband was killed in a plane crash and she became a young widow with two sons. Jeffery had come out to Jean that he was gay. She was devastated when he moved from Beaumont, Texas, to Houston with his boyfriend. Jeffery became like a third parent to Jamie. They had a lot in common and understood each other. Jeffery was extremely protective of Jamie.

Ronny

Ronny is Jamie Brickhouse's half-brother. His father, Len, was killed in an airplane crash. Jean became the single mother of two young boys. Ronny was nothing like his brother, Jeffery, or his half-brother, Jamie. For one thing he was straight while the other two were both gay. Ronny was kind of the oddball of the family in a family of oddballs. He was a loner and socially awkward. He eventually owned and operated his own roofing business.

Mrs. Chambers

Mrs. Chambers was Jamie's favorite teacher in elementary school. He would often eschew the company of kids his own age to spend time with adult women. Mrs. Chambers was his idol. He would happily stay after school to help her. One day she asked him if he knew what a "sissy" was. He wasn't sure, he told her. She told him that she thought his friend, Eric, was a sissy and that if he, Jamie, hung around Eric he might become a sissy too.

Mrs. Hammond

An older neighbor, Mrs. Hammond, taught kids to swim in the summer. Jamie was afraid of water and always dreaded going for his lesson. Mrs. Hammond was cantankerous and treated her young students harshly. When Jamie headed inside for the bathroom, Mrs. Hammond made him go to the bushes to relieve himself. He was reluctant to go in front of her. She became impatient and grabbed his penis to help him.



Genevieve

Genevieve was a friend of Jean's. Jean used to bring five-year-old Jamie with her when she visited her friends, including Genevieve. One day he asked Jean why they didn't go see Genevieve any more. Jean reluctantly told him the truth – she killed herself with a gun. She was an alcoholic - a bad alcoholic - she told Jamie. The obvious message was that there were good drunks.

Eric Munson

Eric Munson was a childhood friend of Jamie's. He had feminine traits that came to the notice of Mrs. Chambers, Jaime's favorite teacher. She told Jamie to stay away from Eric. She thought he was a sissy and that Jamie would turn into one too if hung around with him.

Maggie

Maggie was a good sport and beard for Jamie. In his narrative he makes the point that the beard was solely for the sake of his parents. They were the only ones who hadn't figured out he was gay. Everyone else seemed to know.

Michael Parker

Jamie had a brief affair with Michael Parker. Michael was Jamie's first boyfriend in college. They kept in touch over the years. Michael Parker eventually moved to New York with his boyfriend Bunny.



Objects/Places

Beaumont

Jamie Brickhouse was born and raised in Beaumont, Texas. From a young age he often felt he wasn't a good fit for him. He considered the town to be a hot and steamy "cancer-capital" port town located in the southeast part of the state. The town is situated on the banks of the muddy Neches River. It was part of the Golden Triangle that included Port Arthur, Orange and Beaumont. The only thing that Jamie found exotic about it was that it was only 30 miles away from Mexico.

New York City

Jamie first visited New York City with his parents. He had been disappointed that Jean didn't allow him to visit the city with his drama club that was taking a group trip to the Big Apple. Jamie got over his anger when he arrived in the city. He felt it was where he belonged. He had his first cocktail at the age of 14 in the famous Russian Tea Room where celebrities were everywhere. He vowed to make New York City his home, which he did as soon as he graduated from college.

Acapulco

When Jamie was a young teen, he and his family when on a vacation to Acapulco. His parents were busy drinking and partying leaving Jamie to explore by himself. He got familiar with pina coladas and margaritas and with gay sex. He met two gay men on the beach and went back to their hotel room where he had his first sexual encounter.

Anal Warts

Jamie developed painful anal warts. He admitted to the doctor that he had had anal sex with a man. Since he needed surgery, his parents had to become involved. The proctologist who treated him agreed to keep the cause of his condition from his parents. The doctor told Jean that he could have contracted them from a dirty towel in the gym. She protested – he hadn't taken PE for years. Jamie could see that his father was suspicious.

AIDS

Jamie had an affair with a Catholic priest who admittedly had lapsed a bit. The affair was strictly sexual and lasted a few months. Jamie got a call from Father John who told him that he had developed gonorrhea. Jamie had himself checked out and was told that he had not contracted gonorrhea but that he had tested positive for the HIV virus. The



threat of the virus advancing into full-blown AIDS terrified Jamie. The doctor told him that his condition was manageable at that point but that he'd be on anti-AIDS drugs the rest of his life.

Trinity University

Jamie attended Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. It was located five hours away from Beaumont. Trinity was a liberal arts college that was known to as the Ivy League of the Southwest. What wasn't as well known about the college was that it was rumored to be thirty percent gay – something that delighted Jamie. He made some good friends there and drank his way through many of the semesters. He wanted to major in acting but Jean told him not to even think about it. She always insisted that he should be a writer.

Frog

Jean was not only critical of how her family behaved she was critical of the gifts they gave her. She only like the gifts that she picked out for them to give her. Jean had let it be known that she'd like the Tobacco Leaf china frog that she'd seen in a shop. When Jamie tried to purchase it, they were sold out of frogs so he bought the rabbit from the same set. Jean had a fit when she opened the present. She wanted the frog! She got into a big fight with Earl who defended Jamie. She was so mad she went screeching off in her car. When Jamie returned to New York, his drinking increased.

The Cock, Les Hommes, The Last Chance, The Works

The names of the joints that Jamie hung out in on his frequent pursuit for gay sex are telling and somewhat tragic. It may have been in one of these gay clubs that Jamie contracted the HIV virus. The Les Hommes Bookstore wasn't really a bookstore. It had some porn books but the action took place in the back of the store where there were buddy booths where gay men met up and had sex. The entry charge was \$8 which allowed the customer to troll the buddy booths for some company.

Michael's House

After Jamie tried to commit suicide by taking a whole bottle of Ambien, his mother led an intervention. It was decided that he had to go into rehab if he wanted to save his life. Michael's House in Palm Springs, California, was selected. Jean paid the \$16,000 tab which made Jamie feel guilty but she was glad to pay it if he was able to recover from his alcoholism. No one beat around the bush any longer; Jamie was an alcoholic and substance abuser.



Ecstasy, Cocaine and Crack

Jamie dabbled in drugs along the way although alcoholic remained his favorite substance to abuse. He and Michael got into a vicious brawl when they were vacationing in Zurich over Jamie's interest in Ecstasy which was his favorite drug. One night he smoked crack, unrefined cocaine, with a man he picked up and had sex with. He also used cocaine on occasion. One of his fellow patients at rehab wished him well when Jamie finished his rehab. He warned Jamie that the sparkly white cocaine cause a life of pain.



Themes

Alcoholism

One of the dominant themes that emerges from Jamie Brickhouse's memoir, "Dangerous When Wet," is alcoholism. Through his own memories and words, Jamie provides a formula that is certain to contribute to a youngster developing a taste for alcohol that leads eventually to addiction.

Jamie was a gifted youngster, very precocious and aware of the nuances of behavior and conversation. He loved to look at the wedding pictures of his mother when she married his father. Most times he was more interested in spending time with adult women than playing with kids his age. His parents liked to drink and party and alcohol was always a focus of most every occasion – formal and casual. He had a somewhat distorted value system that caused him to think that drinking was the sign of adult sophistication. Even as a young boy, he pictured himself with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

The parents did more than just set a bad example. Jamie had his first taste of liquor when he was just five years old. His parents probably thought that their intellectually advanced little boy could handle a little buzz. When he was 14, his parents ordered him champagne cocktails in restaurants. Therefore, he didn't begin drinking at college or as a young adult; he'd been drinking for years by then.

The unfair start that Jamie suffering under led to a lifetime of addiction. He ultimately "recovered" in rehab but knows that he'll always be an alcoholic and will have to fight it the rest of his life.

Homosexuality

When Jamie Brickhouse was 14, he realized he was gay. He never had a problem with being gay. He didn't go through a struggle for identity or the agony of facing a life that by many is considered abnormal. Jamie knew he was gay and didn't for a second aspire to any other lifestyle. Being gay was natural and organic to Jamie. It was as much a part of him as his coppery red hair. He often said that he didn't have a problem with being gay but a lot of other people did.

But Jamie knew that his domineering and narrow-minded mother would have a different opinion of his revelation. She found the lifestyle "disgusting." Jean had suffered the angst of having a gay son already. Jamie's older half-brother, Jeffery, was openly gay. He nearly killed Jean when Jeffery left to live in Houston with his boyfriend. She looked Jamie square in the eyes and asked him if he had those tendencies. He knew that he couldn't tell her the truth given the fragile state she was in, so he lied and denied it.



A teacher at school warned him about hanging around with sissies. If he did, he might become one himself. His swimming teacher, an older lady in the neighborhood, grabbed his penis to help him urinate. They were minor incidents; however, he wrote about them, so they evidently had a lasting impact on him.

Perhaps because of his repressed feelings mixed with some shame and guilt for disappointing his mother, he was in a self-destruct mode during some of his years in New York. His lust for gay sex was insatiable. He picked up strangers on many nights and had unprotected sex with them even though he was in a committed relationship with another man. He eventually contracted the HIV virus but it was caught before it advanced into full-blown AIDS. His aberrant behavior can be traced directly to his disapproving mother whose voice always echoed in his ears, "No one will ever love you as much as I do."

Domineering/Controlling Mother

From a young toddler on through adulthood even after he moved out, Jamie had to contend with his mother, Jean, who was controlling, angry and narrow-minded. It was her way or the highway. Although Earl and the other two boys were often the target of her rage and outrage, it was the youngest boy, Jamie, who observed most of it and was her favorite target. She loved him but she wanted him to be what she wanted him to be. She also wanted to keep Jamie to herself.

Instead of encouraging her young son to play with the other children, she took him shopping with her and out to lunch and to visits with girlfriends. Early on, Jamie was one of the girls. He was very bright and soon learned the nuances of girl talk. As a young boy he could keep up conversations with the best of the girls. It became the world he knew because his mother wanted him with her. She was not being a good mother; she had an agenda that was anathema to positive child rearing.

Did Jean intentionally hurt Jamie and push him toward alcoholism? She loved him and didn't want to hurt him at least ostensibly. But, like most narrow-minded people, she did not think beyond the superficial which was the only level at which she could operate and feel comfortable. It was too scary to get into the feelings and needs of others because they might vary from her own.

Even though Jamie was independent enough to move away from home, the long arm of Mama Jean was always there. She didn't have to be with him or on the phone; her voice was in his head and it stayed there forever even after she passed away.

Abandonment

There are many forms of abandonment; it can take many different shapes and sizes. There is the obvious physical abandonment of another person – especially the abandonment of a parent of a child. The mother or father being physically gone from a



child's life is traumatic and has long-lasting impact. However, a parent doesn't have to be physically gone to abandon a child.

When Jamie Brickhouse was just five years old, his parents urged him to take a sip of his first alcoholic drink. It is difficult to get into the mindset of a parent who would encourage a child to drink alcohol. That sip was his first taste and he liked it. In fact he liked it too well and ultimately battled with alcoholism his entire life.

Jamie was abandoned by his parents when they gave him that first drink. And they also abandoned him when he was 14 and ordered a champagne cocktail for him. When they went on a family vacation in Acapulco he broadened his tastes to include pina colada and margaritas while he was still a young teenager. Jamie was drunk most of the time during high school. He wouldn't just get tipsy, he would be blind drunk and lose consciousness.

A parent is supposed to protect his or her child not put them at risk. Later when Jean Brickhouse excoriated her son for being an alcoholic did she think back and remember how it all started?

Guilt/Shame

Emotional and psychological elements play a major role in alcoholism. Like any addiction, alcohol holds out the promise that it can help dull the ache and heal the pain. It is a false promise and those first highs and initial feelings of liberation are brief. The addicted person drinks more to try to recapture that initial high.

Guilt and shame are two emotions that drove Jamie Brickhouse to the abuse alcohol. Some refer to guilt and shame as depression turned inside out. Jamie felt that he had so much to feel guilty about. He knew that the gay lifestyle he led had devastated his mother. Although he was happy with the gay life, there were many others who were not – especially Jean. He couldn't abandon the sexual orientation that he felt he was born with to please his mother. Yet there were so many reminders through her taunts and comments how much he had hurt her.

Both Earl and Jean Brickhouse drank too much but they were able to pull back when they got to the edge. Their son was not as fortunate. When Jamie was sober he felt naked. He craved alcohol like a starving man craves food. It was his life-line. Alcohol was the only thing to turn to when the guilt and shame began to emerge from their repressed state and confront him. Jamie felt terrible guilt when he tried to commit suicide. Liz his close friend and boss died of ovarian cancer and would have given anything to live. Jamie tried to throw his life away.

Jamie made it through rehab to recovery. But recovery from alcoholism is a fragile one and vulnerable to relapse at any time. Jamie learned that he had to deal with the guilt and shame he felt over his mother and others in his life and face them sober.



Styles

Structure

Dangerous When Wet by Jamie Brickhouse is comprised of four major sections including Part I: Golden Triangle (1968-1987); Part II: Mr. Golightly (1990-2006); Part III: Palm Springs Follies (2006); and Part IV: The Hair Is the Last to Go.

In Part I, the author tells about growing up in Beaumont, Texas. He was the youngest child of Jean and Earl Brickhouse. The narrative describes the partying and drinking that his parents took part in. This part also covers when he was a young teenager and began drinking excessively. Part II covers Jamie leaving for New York after his graduation and the impact that his domineering mother still had even though she was a thousand miles away. This section also introduces Jamie's life partner, Michael Hayes.

In Part III Jamie provides an honest description of his careless behavior and the unsafe sex that he engaged in his endless quest for gay male sex. His life was spiraling downward and he was heading in a very bad direction.

Part IV includes Jamie's difficult recovery and his relapses when things built up to an unbearable state and it seemed to him that alcohol was the only thing he could turn to. This is the final section of the book in which the writer provides an update on his life and recovery. He is still with Michael, his HIV has not progressed and he has remained sober for three years. However, he is aware that he will never recover from alcoholism and that he will be an alcoholic for the rest of his life.

Perspective

Dangerous When Wet is a memoir of the life of Jamie Brickhouse as told by Jamie Brickhouse. The narrative, therefore, is told in his voice and not that of a ghostwriter or co-writer. Jamie Brickhouse lived this story and no one could tell it better than Jamie himself.

Jamie had struggled with alcoholism most of his adult life – he had his taste of alcohol at the age of five. Drinking that early was not his doing – it was his parents who thought that because he was so precocious that he could handle a smidgeon of alcohol. Jamie tells the story of how that early introduction to alcohol launched a lifetime obsession with alcoholic drinks, what it did for him and how at many times it was the central focus of his life. Only the individual going through an ordeal that lasted a lifetime could describe the feelings, pain, disappointment and self-loathing that the person himself.

Jamie Brickhouse demonstrates through his writing the dual narrative that he had to deal with from the time he was a little boy. He knew that certain answers riled his mother, Mama Jean, or upset her. Jamie, a gifted child, learned early to give her the answers that she wanted so she wouldn't get angry or be hurt. He learned the hard way



that a dual narrative doesn't work and that someday all those repressed feelings and truths come spilling out in a rage that even alcohol fails to stem.

Brickhouse provides a memoir in which he was able to finally express all his feelings and a work that might be a help to others who are dealing with the same issues.

Tone

Memoirist Brickhouse has provided an entertaining narrative of some of the tragedies of his life. Perhaps it was a learned behavior from his childhood that allowed Jamie to compartmentalize parts of his life. While relating incidents about his domineering mother, he was often able to put that aside and describe the incidents and funny and lighthearted. The writer stays true to this style of writing throughout the entire work.

When Jamie describes some of his ventures into the very dark side of New York, i.e., gay male hook-up joints. He describes walking through one of these horrid places – calling those dives would be too kind. He couldn't find a "hottie" but noticed a partially closed door. He opened the door to find a dwarf who was available for sex. Most people would find the entire episode distasteful but Brickhouse is able to put a funny spin to the story that salvages it for the reader. The dwarf is surprisingly so well endowed that it's Jamie who winds up feeling "small."

But at other times the emotions that Jamie had to deal with in his relationships with his parents, especially his mother, his life partner, his co-workers and the strangers that he picks up for a man's most intimate act come through the pages despite his sarcasm and attempt to lighten the narrative. The memoir leaves off with Jamie staying sober for three years and with his HIV virus still under control. But Jamie and the reader both know that that fragile balance could be upended at any moment.



Quotes

Already I was nostalgic for a past I hadn't lived; felt as if then was better than now."
-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Importance: As Jamie poured over his mother's wedding album, he regrets that he was not at the celebration. He so adored his mother – she was a movie star to him.

I guess they're happy, but I can't help but think that being gay... is... is still a sad, lonely life for most people."
-- Mama Jean (chapter 6 paragraph 38)

Importance: Mama Jean was referring to a dancer and his partner she knew in New York. Jamie was 14 and had just realized that he himself was gay – a notion that Mama Jean did not consciously entertain.

No, you need to be a writer... remember what I've always said: you control your destiny.' I never believed her all the times she said that because I believed that she controlled my destiny."
-- Jamie/Mama Jean (chapter 9 paragraph 9)

Importance: At the same time that Mama Jean tells Jamie that he owns his destiny, she tells him not to be an actor. He should be a writer. Jamie expresses his belief that it is his mother who owns his destiny, a sign of just how she dominated his life.

I went home for a visit and Dad took me out to our first gather-gay son lunch. 'Your mother seems to be surprised, but I think I realized a while ago.'
-- Jamie/Earl (chapter 9 paragraph 17)

Importance: After coming out to his parents, Earl confesses that he had thought for a while that Jamie was gay. Despite that there was evidence galore, Mama Jean had kept her head in the sand about her youngest son.

Being back under Mama Jean's roof felt as oppressive as the humidity."
-- Jamie (chapter 9 paragraph 62)

Importance: After Jamie's first year at Trinity, he spent the summer at home and sweltered under the heat and the dominant personality of his mother. It was "oppressive" and his dissatisfaction hints that he won't last there long especially after his wild year away at school.

I can't tell you that I was happy when Jamie told me he was gay, but when I hear about parents turning their backs on their own children because of that, it makes me sick."
-- Mama Jean (chapter 10 paragraph 31)

Importance: Mama Jean is expressing her feelings about being the mother of two gay



sons. She would have preferred if they were straight but ultimately accepted reality and still loved her sons – although they were the target of her disgust for gays from time to time.

I had finally broken the pattern. I have finally stood up for myself. It just took a few drinks to say what I needed to say, that's all."

-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 20 paragraph 53)

Importance: Jean stopped speaking to Jamie when he told her he wouldn't be home for Thanksgiving. Her tactics usually forced him to do what she wanted him to do. This time it was different. He stood up to her but he needed alcohol to do so.

How many years do I have left? Five? Will I have to take those pills that give you sunken-face syndrome? How long have I been positive? Was there ever a more negative term than positive?"

-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 22 paragraph 34)

Importance: The foregoing are questions that Jamie Brickhouse was told by his doctor that he didn't have gonorrhea but he had tested positive for AIDS. He had not been careful but he thought he would be lucky, be spared from contracting the deadly disease.

I spent every day of those last few months of drinking obsessed with suicide – it was the last thought when I passed out at night and the first thought when I came to in the morning – but I didn't have the guts to do it."

-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 24 paragraph 3)

Importance: Jamie was thrown into a downward spiral over the loss of his boss and friend to ovarian cancer and his own diagnosis that he was HIV positive. His drinking that used to blunt reality was no longer effective.

You know, suicide is a mortal sin. It's a good thing you didn't succeed. If you had, you couldn't spend eternity in heaven with me."

-- Mama Jean (chapter 25 paragraph 62)

Importance: Mama Jean was, of course, happy that her son's suicide attempt failed. But since she had the hubris to be certain that she would go to heaven, she wanted Jamie to be with her again someday.

Once I asked Hank what day it was. He replied, 'How the heck do I know? Every day is like Groundhog Day around here.'"

-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 26 paragraph 53)

Importance: This exchange captures the monotonous days that Jamie experienced at the rehab center he admitted himself to after he tried to commit suicide. The sameness was designed to bring balance and predictability to the lives of those trying to recover from addiction.



For the first time in my adult life I could completely let go of work and family and spend time thinking about me and not running from me.”

-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 26 paragraph 84)

Importance: Jamie was surprised that he enjoyed rehab. In that isolated environment he was free to think about himself and, more importantly, face himself and what he'd become. He saw light at the end of the tunnel – there was hope for recovery.

My alcoholism is the sea, always rushing toward me – sometimes with enchanting whitecaps that shimmer in the moonlight, sometimes with terrifying black waves ten stories high – but always ready to wash away whatever I've created.”

-- Jamie Brickhouse (chapter 31 paragraph 30)

Importance: After being sober for three years, Jamie realizes that he is still an alcoholic and will always be an alcoholic. Recognizing this reality, he will be prepared to fight the temptations it presents when he is at his most vulnerable.



Topics for Discussion

1

How did Mama Jean remain control over Jamie when he was a little boy? How were some of her tactics cruel and potentially debilitating to her young son?

2

How did Mama Jean maintain the upper hand with her husband? In your opinion was he cowed by her or was he on to her and just placated her? Explain your answer.

3

When did Jamie have his first alcoholic drinks? Were the parents negligent in giving him alcohol at a young age? Did they mean to harm him? Explain.

4

Explain the dynamics between Mama Jean and Jamie from his statement that he looked forward to living the gay lifestyle – a lifestyle that his mother detested. Why was Jamie so anxious to adapt a lifestyle that his mother hated?

5

Describe the relationship between Jamie and Michael Hayes. Who cares more than the other? What do you base that on?

6

What was the huge argument that Jamie and Michael had in Zurich about? How did Mama Jean find out about it and what was her reaction?

7

How did Liz try to help save Jamie's job? How did the CEO feel about his behavior and what risk was he taking by continuing his excessive drinking that led to multiple absences? What was the outcome?



8

What led to Jamie's attempted suicide? Discuss how suicides are sometimes done for attention and sometimes are serious attempts.

9

Why did Jamie take Jean doing her own hair as a sign that something was wrong? What were other signs of deterioration? Describe how Earl and Jamie reacted to her failing health.

10

Does the fact that Jamie has stayed sober for three years indicate that he has recovered from alcoholism? What are the different stages of alcoholism and how do they manifest?