

SMOKIN' AND DRINKIN' AND SUCH

I once had a bumper sticker that read, "If you're smokin' in this car, you'd better be on fire." I haven't always been so intemperate, but these days about the only thing I smoke is a turkey breast for Thanksgiving. I grew up in a two-smoker, four-packs a day household, and most of my parents' friends and relatives were satisfied consumers of everything from cigars to snuff. Though it was second-and-third-hand smoke that I breathed, I was a four-packs-a-day man from the day I was born in 1941 until the day I left for college in 1959. As rumors of tobacco's hazards circulated, Charles Harper, Chairman of Reynolds Tobacco, reassured the public, "[Second-hand smoke is not a problem.] If children don't like to be in a smoky room, they'll leave. [As for infants,]...at some point, they'll crawl." The Surgeon's General Report of 1964 dispelled the industry's smoke screen with solid science and led my parents to quit the carcinogenic habit. My father quit smoking over one weekend; my mother weaned herself over a few years.

I recall thinking as a child that the index and middle fingers must naturally yellow as people get older and that all homes were filled with a faint blue fog. I don't recall that the smoke ever really bothered me, but I do know that when a gym and health teacher had us run a few laps in the ninth grade, he asked me as I gasped supine in the infield how many packs a day I was smoking. I was too winded to respond, but at that time unknown to my teacher, I had never smoked an entire cigarette in my life. Occasionally I would draw a mouthful of smoke from one of my father's neglected cigarettes to fill a cellophane pack cover. With the wrapper pulled back a couple of inches and a hole burned through it, a good imitation of a smoking locomotive could be produced by gently tapping the smoke-filled container. The gym teacher, a prematurely militant anti-smoker (this was the mid 50s after all), told the class, "If God had intended for humans to smoke, He would have set them on fire!"

While my teachers and reformed parents did have an influence on my decision not to smoke, I think a pair of photographs in *Life* did more to seal the covenant. Sometime in the mid to late 50s, *Life* juxtaposed two full-page pictures of human lungs removed in autopsies. One pair, taken from a man who had never smoked, was sanguine as a cut of free-range sirloin. The other excised from the chest of a lifetime smoker was black as a tar bucket mop. I was mesmerized by the contrast, and as the blue fog cleared from my parents' home, my own lungs responded well to air devoid of tar and nicotine. In my junior year, I made the track team as a high jumper, quarter miler, and mile-relay man. I never set any school records, but every time I trained, I saw those two sets of lungs hanging before me like misbegotten carrots.

Despite the power of these evocative images, my will did buckle a few times when I was in the service. On maneuvers in southern Germany once, I opened some C rations and discovered a small pack of Lucky Strikes dressed in its WWII colors—the four cigarettes were nearly twenty years old! More out of the boredom of guard duty than any desire to smoke, I lit one up. The tobacco, however, was so dry that when I inhaled, some loose strands of tobacco were sucked into my lungs with the smoke. I commenced with wild gyrations to hack and spit up something resembling pale green slugs. It was so bad that the soldier who relieved me told me to report to sickbay; indeed, I was as green as the

pack I had drawn my Lucky Strike from. My pulmonary convulsions, I thought, would strengthen my resolve, but I was mistaken. A few months later, I was visiting an Army friend who had rented a room in town where he spent his off-duty hours. As I entered, I immediately caught the manly smell from an open humidior of Cavendish Black Cherry pipe tobacco. My friend then filled the bowl of his pipe, tamped it just so, lit the tobacco with a lacquered lighter, and took a long satisfied draft from this small work of art. I admired the ceremoniousness of the procedure, and the aroma was intoxicating. On leaving, I went straight to the Post Exchange and purchased a pipe and a tin of tobacco. At the first opportunity, I lit up, inhaled profoundly, and drew a half inch of orange flame across my naive tongue. By the time it had healed, the cool factor of smoking had dropped to zero. Since then I have been clean.

Well, almost. Like Bill Clinton, I have been passed a few marijuana joints at parties. Some of these I have simply passed on; others I have taken a puff from but did not inhale. Many would say that this is the equivalent of sleeping with Marilyn Monroe and nothing more, but by the 70s, I knew that an unfiltered reefer had four times more tar than a Lucky Strike. Every time I saw a joint being lit, I fancied that I heard it cough. President Clinton was widely ridiculed for saying he never inhaled pot, but I believed him because I had the same desire to look cool and be accepted by my peers while at the same time fearing marijuana would turn my lungs blacker than that cadaver's lung in *Life*.

Beer drinking was another problem altogether. I'd had my obligatory first beer at seventeen and pretended to be stoned after a few swigs. One Friday night, three of my high school friends and I had gone out to get a pizza with the one fellow who had a driver's license. In his trunk were four tepid beers filched from his father's "wine cellar." I'm sure my drunk act wasn't very convincing, but I passed the initiation, and that was all that mattered. My father's bar in the den was always well stocked, but for some reason I had no desire to sample his scotch. Occasionally if I was the first out of bed after one of my parents' cocktail parties, I'd eat the gin-soaked cherries in the empty Tom Collins glasses scattered around the den and kitchen, but the forbidden fruit never produced much of a rush. I preferred to sneak the unadulterated cherries and marble-size onions straight from their refrigerated bottles when I was in my snack mode, which was pretty much the duration of my adolescence. An olive without the gin and vermouth is a "diet Martini," but I was not dieting just yet.

It wasn't until I dropped out of college and was shipped off to Germany by the U.S. Army that I came to know the "revenge of the hops." (Wine gives me a wall-banging headache, so I have only a passing acquaintanceship with "the wrath of the grape.") Drunkenness was my Esperanto when I was stationed in Germany; with a few drinks in me, I could have set Goethe straight if he had rematerialized and wandered into the Kajüte or the Florida Bar, two of the several dives I patronized in the small border town where I was stationed. (When sober, I had a facility with German comparable to a four-year-old.) Bob DiBerardino, a friend of mine, explained that a bartender was just a "pharmacist with a limited inventory." That analogy lent an almost scientific respectability to the German "guest houses" we inhabited in our off-duty time and helped me overcome any misgivings I might have had about rebuilding the post-war German economy with American dollars.

I'll never forget the first real bender I went on in a village outside of Kassel just prior to going on the Wintershield maneuvers. Our team chief Bill Perry drove us to "The

Oblivion Lounge” (Bill’s name for it) which turned out to be something of a shrine to Elvis—there were posters of him on all the walls, and the jukebox, it seemed, played nothing but “*Danke Shane*” and “*Muss-ee-den*.” (As I said, my German was limited.) After a few shots of *Jagermeister*, (a potent liquor that went down like rusty roofing nails), chased with mugs of *Kulminator* (11.8% alcohol!), I was as fluent as Elvis. This lethal combination, however, allowed one to pass from sobriety to hangover without ever being pleasantly high. I had been drinking the 3.5% American brew at the enlisted mens’ club and thought myself a capacious boozehound. When some pretty *Fräulein* asked me to dance, I quickly learned otherwise. My head felt like the bar’s whirling disco ball shimmering unnaturally in the black light. I stumbled around the dance floor, which for some reason my “date” thought was an inventive new American step, but our “dancing” was short lived. Soon she was leading me out back where we both vomited in the outhouse. Good times! My ride, I discovered, had gone off with a “date” of his own, so my newly acquired admirer offered to let me crash in her living room a few blocks away. We helped each other to her family’s medieval abode, and I passed out on the floor after failing to mount the bucking couch. Actually, the entire room seemed to be convulsing which quenched the last embers of my libido. Early the next morning, I awoke with a start on the linoleum when I heard angry parents yelling at their hung-over daughter. I got up as quickly as my head with the self-inflicted wound would tolerate, ran my hand through my hair, made my apologies, got some directions, said “*Auf Wiedersehen*” and “*Danke Shane*,” and walked back to where all this tawdry business began. At least I understood what my father meant when he told me, “If you hoot with the owls, you won’t soar with the eagles.” Fortunately, when I reached the bar, Bill was driving around looking for remnants of the team he was supposed to lead on maneuvers.

Generally, I was a happy drunk who loved to climb things when high, but the logical connection between climbing and getting high was something I could never explain when sober. One night I staggered out of the Kajüte and promptly climbed a thirty-foot linden in front of the bar. A buddy tempted me down like a cat with some tuna by daring me to climb aboard a passing horse-drawn hay wagon. I took the bait, ran to catch the wagon, and climbed aboard. I have forgotten how I got back to the base, but when I did, I decided that at last I was going to climb the mineshaft tower that stood just beyond the gates. I climbed a chain-link fence and began my unsteady ascent of the seventy-foot steel tower. As I approached the top, a gust of cold wind off the North Sea began to sober me up even as it tried to break my grip, so cautiously, I made my way back to earth. I was reminded of that dumb stunt recently reading about a Furman University pre-med student who had too much to drink and challenged his friends to a spit-for-distance contest. Determined to win, he climbed up on the dormitory porch railing thirty feet above the ground to gain some mythical leverage, lost his grip, and fell to his death. It could just as easily have been me forty years ago trying to expectorate on East Germany.

It didn’t take me long to realize that there was a military conspiracy to make all enlisted men alcoholics so we’d re-enlist for the cheap hooch. At the Heidwinkel base Swing Club, for example, beer was free on Monday nights and mixed drinks were a dime on Fridays. In the middle of the week, we were left to our own devices, and these usually involved some competitive drinking game like Categories, Buzz, or Twenty-One. Categories was the most popular because it is so easy to learn but hard to master especially after losing a few rounds. A roll of the dice decides who starts the game, and once chosen, the

leader calls a category like “cars.” As soon as the subject is chosen, the contestant sitting to the leader’s left names an automobile brand after the leader’s fist strikes the table twice. If an acceptable answer is provided (no repeats are permitted), the leader’s fist strikes the table two more times, and the next player names a car. The rhythm has to be maintained; anyone who speaks too soon or late is required to drink a small glass of beer or a shot of bourbon depending on how seriously drunk the group wants to become. After a few rounds, I generally lost all sense of rhythm and found that even with a category like “Items of Apparel You Are Currently Wearing” I got flustered and had to swallow the loss. One of the funniest games that I recall concerned the category of condom brands. It went something like this: “Condoms, thump, thump, Trojans, thump, thump, Sheiks, thump, thump, Pennies, thump....”

“Pennies?” the leader asked, “What’s that?”

“It’s for the guy who wants to come into some money.” We all doubled over in laughter and decided that while there is no such brand name, the name was too good to be penalized.

I believe it was after one such game of Categories that B.J. Smith passed out on the club floor. Someone went to get a razor and shaving cream, and when B.J. awoke, the only facial hair he had left was the right half of his handlebar mustache and his left eyebrow. I was luckier: when I came to, I had two eyebrows divided in the middle, and I’ve never been a unibrow since. The deepest state of alcohol-induced unconsciousness that I have ever visited, however, was the duchy occupied by John Hammond. John actually made it back to his top bunk after a night of Categories, but he soon grew stiff as an I-beam as he spontaneously arose from his mattress supported only by his forehead and toes. A four-inch crevice slowly opened between him and the mattress extending the length of his body. Someone who witnessed this feat of comatose strength wondered if John wasn’t dead and showing early signs of rigor mortis. Before his pulse could be located, however, John’s midsection shivered then sagged, and he was pronounced well enough to ignore. Such indulgence is one of the reasons the world consumes roughly five tons of aspirin a day!

A low threshold of pain, a wife and two children, and a job which requires speaking coherently in public, change many things, and there’s no question that my attitudes toward alcohol changed after I left the service. I have the evidence in my journal. Back in the 60s, I wrote a little ditty called “To the Right Brothers” which goes as follows:

Here’s to the brothers
who helped us to fly—
may the two Gallos
never go dry.

Compare that gladsome toast to “Sunday-Morning Bender Analysis” that I wrote in the mid 80s:

Awake at three
with the postmortem blues,
Jim studies a death
without any clues.

The Jim of that last crotchet, as I call my “four-line couplets,” is the poet and novelist James Dickey, who directed my dissertation at the University of South Carolina in the early 70s. Even though Jim possessed an athlete’s body and one of the finest minds of his generation, he was unable to stop his own right hand from delivering the poison that made his life and family miserable and hastened his death. Jim thought of himself as the George Burns of the vodka bottle: Jim thought he could drink vodka the way Burns smoked a half million cigars and still live to reach a hundred. Jim missed his goal by twenty-six years, but he may have emptied a million jiggers of booze. Close to the end of his life, he admitted that he’d been drunk for the better part of twenty-five years. After reading the biographies of Henry Hart and Dickey’s son Chris, I think the better part of fifty years is more candid.

I first saw Dickey in 1970 when he came to Clemson where he’d been a freshman in 1942 before leaving to join the Army Air Corps. Dickey was scheduled to read one afternoon for about forty-five minutes and then field questions from the student body for the remainder of the hour for a thousand-dollar-plus stipend. I would estimate that he read fifteen minutes and then staggered off stage on a drunken slur. I heard later that he’d been given a fifth of bourbon the night before by one of his old Clemson football teammates as he left a party in his honor. When Dick Calhoun, a colleague in the English Department, went to get Dickey at The Clemson House about an hour before he was scheduled to read, he found his idol in a stupor. Dick called Dr. Bill Hunter who rushed over with a B-12 shot, some pure oxygen, and a respirator. Hunter revived his bearish patient to the point that Dickey thought he was sober, but his 2 PM performance proved to five hundred people in the auditorium that he wasn’t. A year later when I asked him about the Clemson “reading,” Jim said, “I don’t understand why the Clemson people are still so upset; my recollection is that I read for the full hour.” Perhaps he had—in dog hours.

Shortly after the Clemson disaster, I read in an interview Dickey gave *Southern Living* that he was “on the wagon.” In the fall of 1973 when I took the first of four courses from the writer at USC, I was naively expecting to see a rare bird, a reformed alcoholic. I was disappointed, for I smelled alcohol on his breath almost every time I spoke to him. After one class, however, he flattered me by inviting me to join him for a beer at a bar just off campus. I was torn between the opportunity to sit at the feet of the master for a few minutes, and abetting demon rum. Selfishly, I chose to go to the bar with him, but I know now that if I had not accompanied him, he’d have gone alone or with some other student in the class. I say this because many in the bar recognized him calling him “Jim” or “Jimbo.”

Having seen my mentor drunk was enough to reform my drinking excesses. It wasn’t many years after our children were born that I unilaterally decided that they were going to be non-smoking teetotalers. When my German mother-in-law sent us some brandy-filled chocolates for Christmas once, Shane, our son, had no desire to try them, which greatly pleased his parents. It did not please me, however, that he took a dozen of the innocent-looking bonbons to school one day and sold them to a classmate.

Two years later when Shane was in the tenth grade, I helped him order some spider eggs that he planned to use in a science-fair project. When the eggs arrived, we placed them in some glass cages and watched for signs of life. When the tiny creatures hatched, one group was given tobacco smoke to breathe, another received gin to drink, another beer, a fourth strong coffee, and a fifth, the control group, received fresh air and water.

All five had stale bread on which to feed. When the spiders spun out their entrails, only the group on bread, water, and fresh air spun symmetrical webs; the rest lacked all sense of concentricity.

Something about those charmingly wacky webs may have tempted our son to try some marijuana at Myrtle Beach the next summer. One of his friends had “scored some good weed,” as he told us later when my wife discovered some finely minced leaves and seeds in an old prescription bottle. When I asked him why he’d want to live in a semi-comatose state, he replied that it was no different than the beer I drank after a jog. It was his generation’s “drug of choice.” I said it robs your attention span, stunts development, makes you psychologically dependent, and leaves your lungs with four times the tar that a cigarette does. I longed for a copy of those pictures in *Life* to no avail.

When Shane went off to college, I expected the worst, and in 1987, it happened. He was driving back to school at USC when he saw a sign as he approached an exit that read, “Drug Check Two Miles Ahead.” So with an ounce of marijuana under his seat, he decided he’d foil the cops and leave the Interstate immediately. He did and ran straight into the cops’ dragnet. The contraband was soon discovered, and after a night in jail, the judge fined and sentenced him to attend Narcotics Anonymous for six months. Frightened by the whole experience, Shane decided to take the NA meetings seriously, but the death of an acquaintance, I think, had more impact than anything I or any of his peers at the meetings said.

Shane didn’t know Daniel well because the latter was a couple of years ahead of him in high school, but they liked many of the same local bands and frequently showed up at the same concerts. In 1988, the Grateful Dead came to Atlanta. Shane’s boss at the restaurant where he was busing tables refused to give him the night off, so Shane could not attend without risking his job, which paid him a pittance but fed him all the ribs he cared to eat. Shortly after the Atlanta concert began, a Deadhead passed Daniel some white powder that he thoughtlessly ingested. Unfortunately he suffered a violently allergic reaction to the drug (later identified as LSD), ran out of the Omni, roughly accosted several pedestrians, tried to open the door of a passing vehicle, and then at a full sprint, dived seventy-five feet to his death off a freeway overpass. Shane attended the funeral, and his grief was as palpable as his life was altered.

Our daughter, Anja, on the other hand, joined the “Dare to Say No to Drugs” Club after witnessing her brother’s debacle, but she developed a taste for the microbrews when she moved to New York to work after graduation. When I questioned her about her vow not to “desecrate the temple,” she said she’d seen the pictures of her mother drunk at New Years in an old scrapbook. I should know; I took the pictures and helped to find her when she dashed laughing into a blizzard shortly after midnight. Anja, however, never had the problems with controlled substances that our son did. An old boy friend of hers who later became an MD told her of smokers he’d met at the hospital where he’d volunteered who after losing their larynx to throat cancer stuffed two or three cigarettes in their tracheotomy hole. Others breathing pure oxygen, he said with more moral authority than I could muster, routinely turned off their supply tank just long enough to smoke without risking an explosion. Such are the sagas that do more than logic, science, and parents can to save the children.

With the profit margin on cocaine running 17,000 to 1, with drug pushers so de-

terminated to succeed that they build multi-million-dollar submarines to ferry their product, and with addictions so powerful some have snorted a million dollars into the black holes of their nostrils, controlled substances are not going away any time soon. We might as well try to legislate the weather. So rather than attempting to interdict lightning, as I tell students when I'm riding this hobby horse, it's best to seek a haven from the storm. This means learning the consequences of a zillion volts coursing through the body and locating shelters before the thunder starts. Finally, I tell any, who are still listening, that every wall built to keep out drugs is a Maginot Line. After explaining the allusion to students who only dimly recall the 1991 Gulf War, I conclude by saying the Great Wall of China extends some 1,500 miles, and the perimeter of the fifty American states is roughly 20,000 miles. I'm not saying a 20,000 mile long wall can't be constructed (a hundred million dollars should do it), but if it is built, how do we expect to get to the Bahamas, much less Staten Island?

Though several of my army friends liked to quote the old saw: "In wine is wisdom; in beer, strength; in water, bacteria," I never came close to confusing a six-pack with a support group. Nor did I ever consider draining a lava lamp and drinking its contents the way one lifer sergeant did when the Swing Club was closed for repairs, and the Berlin crisis in 1961 meant everyone was confined to base. When I graduated from college, I had a 3.5—grade-point average, that is, not blood-alcohol level. I can honestly say that while I was in school I spent more money on books and recordings than alcohol. I wish all students could make the same claim, but I know that whether it's alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or something stronger still, virtually everyone is going to experiment with some mind-expanding, inhibition-lowering substance, legal or otherwise, before leaving this life. Benjamin Franklin argued that beer is proof that God loves us. And the Vatican has assigned St. Bibiana the hapless task of comforting hung-over Catholics. No extraterrestrial support for smokers is available that I'm aware of. I still can't say for sure, but I'm willing to bet that God is a moderate drinker and a non-smoker. I'll send up a smoke signal when I know.

COAST CURE

For Anja

If tired of the din
and gloom is chronic,
the sea is gin,
her wind's a tonic.