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“Booze takes a lot of time and effort if you’re going to do a good job with it.”
(Raymond Carver, *Stories*)

It is early 2002. I am 61 years old. At an age where many men have given it up I am still drinking – heavily. I saw some younger guy quoted the other day as saying that drinking served no useful purpose in his life, and he just got tired of it. That hasn’t happened to me. In a piece called ‘Quitting’ the writer Elmore Leonard says that ‘it was inevitable that if I had any intelligence at all, I had to stop. I realised that I had to quit or go all the way and forget about it, the hell with it. Goodbye brains’. Brains matter to me so that’s a message I ought to pay attention to but I’m still on course to go all the way. Why am I an alcoholic? I don’t mix white wine with my orange juice at breakfast; I don’t hit the hip flask at 11am; I rarely drink at lunchtime; I hardly ever drink spirits (although I used to). I’m an alcoholic because from about 3pm onwards – unless totally distracted – I look forward to drinking wine at 5pm. And that’s not all. Once the first bottle is open I go on drinking throughout the evening. You can get through a lot of wine if you start at five o’clock.

I saw someone referred to as a ‘semi-alcoholic’. I know of this person. He is almost certainly an alcoholic. But it’s a new gloss on addiction. How can you be a semi-alcoholic? Does it mean you tie one on from time to time but otherwise leave it alone? Or stay dry during the week and go on a bender at the weekend (like most of the Swedish working class are supposed to behave)? Or you just drink rather a lot but not enough to draw attention to yourself?

No, I’m afraid this ‘semi-alcoholic’ business is a non-runner. Much as I might like to think it could be me I would just be letting myself off lightly. Either you are smitten with the sauce or you can take it or leave it – and that means what it says, leave it. Not sure where that places those who are

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dependent on drink every day but are not what you would call sozzlers. I'm thinking of couples who every night treat themselves to a gin-and-tonic before dinner and then drink a bottle of wine over dinner. It's a habit, maybe a nice habit, but it's also a dependency. Yet calling them semi-alcoholics would be meaningless. It seems to me there is no halfway house for alcoholics, just like there are no semi-psychopaths or semi-kleptomaniacs.

My wife Karen would dearly like to know why I drink so heavily. When I worked full-time she more than once declared that all that endless gibbering about empathy (not to be confused with sympathy); active listening (but what if you don't want to listen?); learning from mistakes (no one ever does); being proactive (but look what that can get you into as I know very well); parking bad karma (no, it's not binning a foul Indian takeaway); giving feedback sandwiches (no, not double pastrami on rye with mayo and dill pickles on the side, but rather stroke followed by cuff followed by another stroke but silkier this time, e.g. I liked the way you did X; what I'd like to see you doing more of is Y; why don't you use the way you do X to help you with Y?); talking the talk and walking the walk (nothing more fatuous); plus all that other management-speak and psychobabble: all this, Karen said, would drive anyone to drink. But she is looking for a deeper explanation. She recalls me saying something about really liking to drink and contrasting myself with my sister Joan who claimed to hate the vodka she so diligently poured down her throat. That raises the question: does liking it or hating it make you the real deal? It's a non-question. Liking it or loathing it is neither here nor there. I don't believe drunks loathe it anyway. Even if you're on toilet duck you find a way of getting it down.

Dad was a bit of a soak and he really liked it. Even when his kidneys were badly on the blink he still managed three whisky-and-gingers at a sitting and I bet he wanted that fourth. Water he wouldn't touch. Water? No thanks. Fish make love in it. W.C. Fields' other watery quip – water rusts pipes – I don't think he knew. If my kidneys are anything like Dad's then I am a goner although since I have already lived longer than he did 'goner' isn't quite the word, but you get my drift. Anyway, he always blamed the state of his kidneys on the rheumatic fever he contracted as a child.

Raising the topic of booze with me is never easy. I accept that. Prickly and defensive, Karen calls me. I have a position, which is: you can't intellectualise drink, or basically do anything with it. Sure, you can describe it or praise it or poormouth it but ultimately it is an irrational thing. Perhaps

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the genetic explanation of why I drink is less threatening than most. I can always blame my ancestors although what the hell use that is Karen doesn't know.

The genetic scenario is always worth an airing not least because the jury is still out (and always will be). Our older girl, Alice, likes a drink but the other, Claire, can take it or leave it. If she takes it she suffers so she prefers to leave it. 'Have you ever thought you drink because of body chemistry?' Karen asks one night. 'The genes I mean.' Cop that terminology. This is a conversation we could not have had even twenty years ago.

We are sitting in the kitchen, a bottle of red already under the cosh. She doesn't drink any more to speak of, only what we call parrot mouth, which means a tiny, tiny glass that a parrot might just clear in two goes. She thought her liver was packing up. Which must be, she reckons, what is happening to my organ. All grey and shrivelled at best: the size of a walnut, a small walnut. I'm not in a position to disagree. If we could scan our livers the morning after life might be quite different – although the state of the face usually gives it away. 'Could be genes', I say, 'I wouldn't rule it out. You know everything can be explained by things we know nothing about'. This is standard stuff, my usual way of fending off the awkward subject. She perseveres. 'Well, your father drank a bit, more than a bit. And didn't you say your grandfather knocked it back? And Alice likes a drink.'

All this I have to concede although I strenuously resist Alice's inclusion in the gallery of family drunks. A much better candidate is Uncle John – the Wood family's mystery man. He went away to sea very early – there is a picture of him as a rating looking terribly young – so it didn't take him long to figure out the lie of the land at home. After the war he rose quickly within Shell to become a tanker captain. The one and only time we visited him on board – it was at South Shields – he showed off his cocktail cabinet. Flash might be the word if I'd seen enough of them but it was the first I'd ever seen. Compact, as it had to be on a ship, it housed a collection of bottles of all shapes and sizes – tall, stubby, square shoulders, sloping shoulders, round shoulders, almost round with a couple of dimples. One bottle even had something in it, some vegetation was it or it could have been a large insect or even a small animal. The contents of the bottles were amazing too, colours I never knew drink came in – blue, yellow, green, pink, red, purple even and brown, naturally. Then what about those glasses – how can so many be packed into that small space? Nothing Woolies about the glasses

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mind; that much I can tell. They're all made of crystal by the look of it, some tapered, some regular, some squat. And the little bucket with the tongs sticking out, what exactly would that be for?

No doubt my incipient interest in all things alcoholic had been aroused because I was entranced by it all. If a mechanical foot-high waiter had sashayed out on a little platform, black hair slicked back, round tray perched on upturned flat of hand, I would not have been surprised. Except there was no need for an automaton because Uncle John had already made us perfectly aware that he had his own human servant who he could summon at the press of a button. That's who packs in the glasses.

I don't know whether we were offered a drink that day or what I would have asked for if we had been. I was 17 so sort of eligible, especially on board where I don't suppose licensing laws applied and Uncle John would have turned a blind eye anyway. In case we were asked I looked for something familiar but there was not a bottle of beer in sight. In the event the Malay servant produced tea although I can't be certain that Dad and his brother didn't put away a couple of snifferoonies. They certainly lit up – and often. Uncle John died of lung cancer, it was said, but who knows of what else.

Then there is his older brother. Whisky is Uncle Bob's tippie of choice. If you add in Stew, my cousin, who also likes a drop, it looks a foregone conclusion on the male side. There is not a male with genetic connections who doesn't drink and some really put it away. My mother's father I don't know about. He died well before I was born. Probably not a drinker being Welsh chapel. The women, by the way, are above reproach – let's leave Alice out of it. My mother didn't drink – if she had we would really have been up shit creek – nor her mother, also Welsh chapel, nor Auntie Hilda who lives with a teetotaller, nor her daughter Elizabeth. And I don't imagine my grandmother Elizabeth was allowed to do much sipping not unless she fancied three pints of ale at 10 o'clock at night. No, there is only one lush on the distaff side. She drinks for all of them.

I have looked into the genetic scenario. Basically it boils down to sons of alcoholics drinking to ease their tension, itself a compound of agitation, impulsivity, and boredom, finding in alcohol a relaxation they could not get otherwise. A craving for calm seems to be an emotional marker of a genetic susceptibility to alcoholism.

Guilty as charged on all counts. The fact is – and anyone who knows me well will vouch for this – I *am* agitated, I *am* impulsive, I do get bored easily,

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and I certainly crave calm. I was highly-strung in childhood, still am, and definitely anxious. I am also the son of an alcoholic. Alcoholic? If I am, Dad was. Or was he? Was it more that he was a social drinker, albeit a heavy one? A semi-alcoholic perhaps? Or maybe a part-time alcoholic. Whatever, I can't imagine Dad gagging for a glass of wine around five every night. Agitated and highly-strung are not words I would ever use to describe him. That's not what Dad's war record said either. Perhaps it was coming to terms with post-war life, and what was on his plate, plus what he got used to during the war that launched him into regular drinking. And while we're on the subject of agitated and highly-strung let's not forget what my mother brought to the party.

Karen is all ears when I tell her the sons of alkies stuff. She fancies herself as an amateur psychologist. Up to now she has sponsored the theory that I drink to blot out my childhood. You might as well say I drink to drink is my response when in devil's advocate mode. Now Karen comes up with something I have never considered before which I suppose is a refinement of her primary theory because it introduces the notion of a causative trigger.

'Do you think that you start drinking in the evening because you associate that time with anxiety, you know with your mother upstairs in bed and your dad out somewhere? I can imagine that happening. After all, you don't drink much during the day, if at all.'

I hadn't expected her to take this line but I go along with it to see where it might go.

'Could be, could be. Why not? I'm not ruling anything out – or in. But I don't think not drinking during the day has anything to do with it.'

And then I think 'so what'. How does that, or any other theory rooted in childhood experience (or anything else for that matter), help me to stop drinking?

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The bottle stands empty. 'Fancy a bunk-up?' I ask Karen. Cue a ritual exchange.

'You've drunk too much.'

'No, I haven't, only one bottle.'

'You know I can't stand limp dick.'

'I'll be all right.'

But will I be all right? Karen looks for the signs. Red face, that is

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customary. Any sway in the walk? Looks OK. So she contents herself with: 'You'd better be up to it. And I mean up'.

This particular night I feel about 85% confident. Mustn't panic, though. At times like this – when Mr Priapus has chosen not to call promptly – what you absolutely must not do is attempt to conjure up some favourite carnal scene. It could be Jessica Lange writhing around on that flour-scattered table in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or else – another favourite of mine – the scene from the Proust film where a vertical Jeremy Irons, cigarette holder in mouth, fucks a *putain* nonchalantly from behind. It's the nonchalant that resonates. If it's nonchalant it must be a breeze. Trouble is I've started analysing. Once you start thinking you're finished. You can't use Lange or Irons or anyone else. What you must do – and this will be no news to any men reading this – is to clear your mind, put the brain on hold, and let the business end come up if it will. That way you can fuck without fucking up. You are concentrating – concentrating very hard – but concentrating in a vacuum (if that makes sense). No use engaging in that puerile Linford Christie motivational stuff where you say to yourself you are in the zone or is it the tunnel or maybe the funnel and then visualise yourself breaking the tape and winning the race. You might as well try to imagine what it might be like to run 100 metres with a Rockingham tea set stuffed down the front of your one-piece.

It comes down to this – so to speak – providing I take my own advice about relaxing more often than not I can achieve a sort of toehold – cockhold even – from where I can reach home. Once closure has been achieved I am ludicrously pleased, triumphant that I have got by again. Schopenhauer, who referred to the genitals as "the real focus of the will", would have nodded grimly and then produced a telling phrase in German for 'men's brains are in their pants'.

All the same it's no good.

'Where do we go from here? It's an uneven contest, isn't it?'

Karen is right – drink wins hands down. Drink may be a prerequisite for sex but sex is rarely, if ever, a prerequisite for a drink (although a drink afterwards can be nice). That's why you can't neutralise drink with the odd bit of naughtiness – especially if the craving is genetically driven. Which it might be, you never know.