

Drink and the Devil

Richard Clark

*Fifteen men on a dead man's chest
Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum
Drink and the Devil have done for the rest
Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum*
-“Treasure Island” Robert Louis Stevenson

When he was twenty-eight-year-old the man began to have a recurring nightmare. He was on the London Underground with his wife, a little before Christmas. Lunch at Simpsons on the Strand had been followed by shopping at Harrods and Selfridges. They carried big bags of gifts and tasteless tidbits wrapped in cellophane and colored ribbon. They were happy, not a care in the world. As the train trundled along the tunnel beneath the Thames, the wife said she could hear the sound of rushing water. “Don’t worry,” the man told her, “the train is watertight.” They sat quietly but the sound of turbulent waters grew. The train stopped and the lights flickered. The wife pointed to the floor of the train. A large hole had appeared beneath the siding doors, water was beginning to lap into the carriage. They had to stand on the seat to stay dry but the waters kept rising. The cold black water swirled in great eddies through the carriage and a green sea snake swam around them in the roiling current. The wife began to scream. The water covered the man’s face; the snake slithered into his mouth down his throat and settled quietly in his stomach.

A few months before the nightmares started, the man’s life had been simple. He had left high school at seventeen, skipped university and gone straight into the workforce. At a time when big corporations couldn’t hand out money fast enough, he had found a job as an oil trader. The man worked hard but he felt insecure and somewhat lost in the rarified air of Big Oil. So he also played hard, and he found he needed a small shot of something or other every morning to keep his spirits up and the fear down. He travelled extensively to Europe, trading and drinking vodka with the slowly emerging peoples of post-Perestroika Eastern Europe. He bought and sold oil by day and drank copious pints of Old Speckled Hen with his colleagues in the Prince Albert by night. After six good years he was wooed by a competing firm that threw £20 notes at his feet. Life was easy and he was transcendent. He had few responsibilities and thought little about anyone’s needs except his own. But the company was owned by a group of

disinterested Greek businessmen and the office was run by a jaded and cynical manager. The man continued to party but the market was changing and his selfish attitude and sense of indestructibility finally caught up with him. He missed his targets for three months in a row but the gin never missed its mark. At the end of the third month, Jaded and Cynical called the man into his office and said, "Sorry, we have to let you go."

Fired? Surely not! The shame! The humiliation! He packed his things into a box and stepped out of the office; he stood on the wet sidewalk in the grey winter evening rain and felt the serpent of fear rise slowly once again from his belly.

The man called his many friends in the industry looking for help. But these friends, so warm, so amiable, so open and available yesterday were quickly distracted and busy today. His wife, caught up in the trappings of middle class living and horrified that the neighbors would find out that she was using coupons in her weekly shop, became increasingly distant and eventually drifted back to the apparent safety of her parent's townhouse in Reading. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen!" For the last nine years, he had owned the world, had the Midas touch and could do no wrong. Now the man was drowning in self-pity, despair and the worst that Tanqueray could throw at him. It took control of his life; the bottle became his friend, his enemy, but mostly his master.

The man took a job with the city council's garden department which paid £6 an hour. He handled many of the sundry duties of the department: collecting squashed hedgehogs and other road kill, returning stolen supermarket carts from streambeds and lawns, planting red geraniums in the town square, and weeding two acres of unforgiving council land behind the football stadium. The foreman of the garden department was a brusque and mostly paralytic Scot who had moved south to England some ten years earlier after a farm accident took both of his legs. He had conquered the use of prosthetics and it was difficult to tell that he wore them. Shortly after the man joined the council, the Scot invited him to play badminton and he beat the man with ease. The man laughed at the irony and they became good friends, sharing the same view of life through the distorted reflection of the whiskey bottle.

One afternoon the Scot came home to find his wife in bed with one of the garden workers. Two swift punches put the worker down and the Scot disappeared into his back yard. Fearing for their safety, his wife and kids went to find the man. The man went to the Scot's house and heard a terrible wailing; a deep, deep sobbing came from the garden shed. Such emotions of regret the man had never heard from any human soul. It seems the affair had been going on for over a year and the distraught Scot met the 9:36 to Paddington head on the next morning. The man could see that the Scot's life had been full of sadness: the accident, the drinking, the

betrayal. No matter how low his own life had sunk he could see that others had plunged to even lower levels of torment. Many of them survived, perhaps most of them. Some re-found happiness, perhaps a vague facsimile of happiness, but enough to get them out of bed in the morning. The man certainly wasn't at the Scot's level of bleak misery. There had to be a way to curb the fear without needing to suck on the teat of the Maenads.

The man fought for a way back. He tried dating again and a new job selling apples at the farmers market brought brief respite but the need to keep his fears at bay was always too strong. Again and again, night after night, he sought solace in the grape or the grain. He lost weight. He sold his furniture and clothes. The fetters of drink overwhelmed him. Every night the snake visited him in the train; it swam in the contents of his bacchanalian life blood before slipping unobstructed down his gullet. One night he saw the snake swimming in his bottle of vodka. It told him to lie down and go to sleep. So he did.

Richard Clark hadn't crossed the threshold of university halls until he joined Dominican's Pathways Program 11 years ago. If all goes well this semester, he will finally graduate with a degree in Humanities. Richard works in the oil business; providing marine fuel to ocean going vessels: tankers, cruise ships, freighters – really anything that floats and needs fuel to get from A to B. Richard is married with two teenage daughters and lives and works in San Rafael.