

From *A Chestbook Festschrift*, by Ray Fahrner and Bill Yarrow

The Anger Shoppe

Inseminating about all that had passed between us, I meandered through the historic downtown, as it will be. The brickwork, occasional gardens and old hardware store yoked my loosely troubled mind. I could imagine, at the end of one street, where the bridgework led to the dentists' district.

Turning left, my nose fell upon a store that I vaguely remembered, though it was clear as broken glass that it had been there forever. It smelled really vile. The outside of the shop looked like it had been built for the set of a Dickens movie. It was all septic toned, with appealing, lead-based paint, shadows, stools, hats with brimstones, and there was a dripping, stinking, broken downspout coming off of the corner of the building.

Still, the scent aroused my curiosity. I opened the door, which bumped into an old-time bell, ringing it. A man with a wooden leg thumped over to me, scarcely looking up. His rough, though profound, face was weathered and distracted, with a distant demeanor, and you could see the sea in his eyes. He spoke, with authority, his voice matching his face.

"Aye, now, ye be just in time for the samplin'. Rest y'r sad ass down, will ye, and I'll bring the bo'ttles over. I'm the Cap'n."

"Well, thanks, Captain," I answered, "I'm not sure I have time today for..."

But he dismissed me with a small, authoritarian motion of his hand. This slight gesture I cannot replicate. It allowed me no alternative than to sit on the rough-hewn stool by the equally weathered, quarter-sawn white oak bar. I was alone. I had a strange sensation that the Captain had been expecting me. He returned with a beat up wooden tray holding a dozen bottles of various shapes, sizes, colors and materials, and several oddly sized glasses.

"I 'spect you'll enjoy this tastin', which has been p'ticularly selected jus' for ye," the Captain said. At that, he paused, and looked me piercingly in the eyes, one of the only two times of the entire visit that he did so. As he did, he showed his teeth and turned the corners of his mouth up slightly, but this was not a smile. This man was looking into me, and what he saw, which I could not see, sent a shiver down my back and through my privates. The Captain contemplated the musky bottles, mumbling and expletiving, then he slowly chose a dusty leather-covered bottle.

"Let's start wi' this 'n. Many folk find it to their liking. Curious thing, though. It's strange 'n, 'tis. The more you talk about 'er, the more she loses her bite."

He poured. I raised bullseye shot glass, which was slightly warm, to my eye. The liquid was grey and opaque, though it looked... deep. How could that be? As I moved it to my nose, I noticed what can only be described as a dirty, disapproving or warning look from the Captain. So I brought my lips to the glass for a cautious taste, but at that moment the Captain struck my elbow with the back of his hand, dumping the entire contents of the glass down my throat.

I knew the taste instantly, and exclaimed, “Oh, it’s a bit tart, with tones of citrus, but bitter, though the small, cute, upturned nose is deceptive…” and with my words, the flavor changed to that of medicinal chalk – rather, it changed into a texture.

“Captain, that was too weird. May I have a second taste, to drink at my own pace?”

“No, m’ boy, these are all habit forming, to some uncertain degree. Best to continue with the secon’ glass, mark my meanin’.”

The strange, though compelling, man then reached for a mottled brown ceramic bottle, uncorked it, and poured a double shot glass to the rim with a somewhat chocolate colored, syrupy liquid.

“Careful with this’n. Very tasty, but the likes of the hangover are unlike anythin’ you’ve ever imagined. You’ll be dragging for months. And it’s particularly addictive – some say it haunts you forever, though I don’t subscribe to that thought.”

This time I sipped unmolested. And oh, what a sip! The liquid, like a kiss, moved around in my mouth, deep into my cheeks, my teeth, taste buds. Though I tried to contain it, it seemed to increase in volume, and it dribbled out of my mouth’s corners. I lost focus, almost lost sense, just trying to manage the liquid, which almost wanted to drown me. It then seemed to swallow itself, and what remained was a thirst like none I’ve known, a slight headache, and a single-minded, violent craving for more.

The Captain thrust a glass into my hand, saying, “Quick, drink this, rinse it around in your mouth. It’ll chase that other’n.”

I did so, near-panicked and without pause, unthinking. The blood-red liquor exploded inside me. I could not see. My extremities burned white. Ah, I was alive, I was larger, stronger, smarter – all-knowing – but I could not see. And then I could, and I was myself again, I think.

“You OK?” the Captain asked, without a bit of concern in his raspy voice. He offered me a small, palate-cleansing biscuit, covered with sea salt.

Why didn’t I leave then? This was a tasting of poisons. But, the way they made me feel was new. I needed to know. I had no choice.

The fourth sample, served in a thimble-sized, hand-blown glass, the Captain said was just for sipping, it was so strong. “It’ll rot yer guts and y’ll smell like sumpin’ crawled in a corner of ye’ ‘n died.” The next, unusually, he gave me three small samples of, and the more I drank, the better it tasted – with notes of experience, expectation and curry - though it was increasingly difficult to swallow due to its honeyed thickness. The sixth sample came from a highly polished, mirrored aluminum bottle, and the liquid itself was mercury-like in appearance, and very reflective. Now, each taste was better than the last, and what side effects there were, I seemed to forget in short order.

Samples 7 and 8 were similar, and reminiscent of V., but after I had tasted them, the Captain poured them together. There seemed to be a strange reaction, with small flashes

of light and galactic swirls, then the liquid turned ugly. When I drank it, I threw up immediately. I drank again, with a similar result. I persisted, for perhaps seven or eight sips, until I could finally keep the mixture down without gagging.

By this point, the Captain was completely in charge, though I never felt that he mocked me. I drank a bitter yellow liquid that reminded me of my childhood; then a jet black, unknowable draught that made me sweat; and a large glass of colorless, tasteless stuff that the Captain said would never leave my system. The tasting ended with a snifter of something cognac-like. As I drained it, I became increasingly tired, but restless. I stood, staggering, saying nothing, staring at the Captain, who did not return my gaze. Then, abruptly, he looked up.

“Here’s a little gift from the shoppe,” he winked, handing me a small but heavy bottle, carefully wrapped, with my name on it. “This’n has to be drunk when y’r by y’rself.” I turned and slowly walked out of the shoppe and away, not toward anywhere. I knew that he was standing in the doorway, watching my uneven step, calculating. When I turned to look back, he gave a small, unsmiling nod and backed slowly in, quietly closing the rotting door.

[To be continued]

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