

WATER OF LIFE

Scotch pouring into a glass reminded Roger of a woman arching her back. He loved the sinewy curves in motion. As life should be. You could pour your whole life in a rocks glass and hold that glass in your hand, cool and smooth, round and weighty. Your whole life of dreams, gains, dreads, pain and drink it down. One sip at a time, letting each burn your tongue and clear your throat, drinking until it was gone.

Single malt was a bit of a misnomer. It connoted purity and simplicity, and a good Scotch whisky aspired to neither. Nutty, buttery, earthy, fiery flavors emerged from just barley, water, yeast, and a passing of years. The combinations of flavors, and adjectives to describe those combinations, were limitless. Far from single.

But right in his hand. Golden amber. Light moved slowly through the liquid. Even the laws of physics savored the substance. Roger smelled the alcohol evaporating from the surface. His cheek muscles flexed.

"They only bottle a couple cases a year," David said from the other side of the counter. "You've got to see this place. I swear it's unchanged in 200 years."

Roger had given David his first airplane when he was about a month old. A pale blue, DC-10 shaped rattle. The boy never took to it. You can't tell with babies. It's foolish to try. They can take a liking to the corner of an old rag, and never touch the treasures of Toys R Us because . . . who knew, they were babies. Except Roger remembered

the snub. For 28 years he remembered that tiny moment when David pushed the airplane aside with the back of his overstuffed sausage of a hand.

"The color is excellent." Roger held the glass high, gazing into the undulations of yellows and golds around shadows.

"No dyes or additives, of course." David held his glass up as well. "Oak sherry casks. No one was sure exactly how old. The distiller was one of the first to possess a license, so officially everything started in 1823, but the place was distilling long before that. Older than the States, they said."

"Amazing." Roger swallowed the warm spit in his mouth. . . not the scotch. Not at all, ever, the scotch.

They ran into each other at a wedding. David's cousin. It was a noisy jumble of people who would otherwise never cram into the same banquet hall. The father of the bride, Roger's brother, told Roger he'd have something special behind the bar, set aside just for him. Something to cut the tediousness of lithe women raising their arms to confusing music, twirling, flushed, reminding him of his age, compounded by the pressure of family rendered unavoidable.

"Is that Glenmorangie?" It was David. It was the first he'd heard from him in two years. It was what a snake must feel like when he finally gets rid of that old, itchy, dead skin, slithering out into the new sun.

Roger turned, elbow on the bar and looked at the boy. Crisp and clean. The purple shirt was showy, but the black suit perfect. He didn't look gay. Thank fucking heaven. He didn't look gay.

"You're familiar with Glenmorangie?" Roger asked.

"A highland single malt."

Roger's eyebrows rose, his mouth a lowercase 'n'. "I am impressed."

"There's a first time for everything, I guess." David smiled.

Roger looped his hand in the air, from the bar tender to his glass. "One these for my son."

"Thank you very much."

"I didn't know you were a single malt man."

"There's a lot about me you don't know." David stuck his elbow on the bar. He watched the glass being poured. "Not that you'd want to know much of it. Never mind. Water over the dam."

"I thought it was under the bridge. Water under the bridge."

David took his drink hand held it up. "Here's to usquebaugh. The water of life."

They clinked glasses, the closest they'd come to touching since David left for college.

That's where he went gay, Roger told his buddies. God damn liberal tree-hugging school charges you a fortune to turn your kids gay. He didn't believe these things. Nobody did. They were fun to shout over clattering ice cubes and chattering wives. It was much more rewarding to blame a school than to blame genes or upbringing or worse, to blame nothing. To say David preferred boys in the same way Roger took a shine to redheads, to think the whole embarrassing, inconvenient life-style was as inexplicable as taste . . . that just wasn't fair. That meant things couldn't be changed. Fought.

You have to fight for the life you want.

Roger fought. He flew 39 missions in Viet Nam. Scouting, insertion and his least favorite, but most important, retrieval. He piloted UH-1 helicopters. He'd been shot at more times than he allowed himself to remember. He even shot back once. He pulled his side arm and shot a dog jumping at his tail rotor. If the dog hit the rotor, unbalanced it, they would have been stuck there in the field. Sitting ducks, as it were. So he shot the dog. He loved that story. It was one he could tell, in its cleaned-up, Technicolor version.

He fought for a job with the airlines, then he fought his way to the top. That's what a man did. If you wanted a wife and two kids and a pool and a Porsche, you fought for it.

When you have it all, you fight to keep it, too. When you blow a .08 and they clip your wings, you fight that, though the battle's not glamorous. Not too many high-fives with the boys once you're in a program. A daily, grinding, constant contest. Like doing calculations in the back of your head, uncertain there's even an answer.

"Try it," David took a long sip of his own. "It's like a story. You can taste the salty sea air, the stones of the stream, the smoke of the peat that roasted the barely. It's not unlike butterscotch, but in a seriously adult kind of way."

Roger nodded. David looked good. Healthy. He wasn't all spindly and pale, like he expected. The boy somehow stayed colored and fit, even though he shunned every kind of sport man ever invented. Roger erected a basketball hoop in driveway before David turned ten. The boy used it on occasion, through high school, as a conversation aid. No pick up games. He and his friends just tossed the ball

in the direction of the hoop as they talked. No charging, no elbows, no score.

Golf lessons were a total waste of money. The boy had a great swing. He played a decent round. If he gave two shits, he would have been really good. Given the choice of walking through model homes with his mother or playing just nine holes with him, David always set the clubs aside, with skillful apologies.

David liked the car. Roger's '71 911. Smooth, silver, powerful chic. He helped him wash it, wax it and tune it. He was great at adjusting the belts and reaching the very back plugs. Throughout his teenage years, David could slide under the car without jacking it up first. He was handy and did what was asked, but that was it. No spark beyond that. David didn't care for car shows or magazines or hours in the hot sun on a grassy field displaying 60 other cars not dissimilar from Dad's.

He did not want to fly. He never expressed an interest in taking lessons. When Roger rented a Piper Cub and took David up, he wanted to look at the buildings. He wanted to fly near the city, to see the big buildings. Flying was a means to an end Roger couldn't fathom. Flying was the end, after all. Flying was the greatest thing a man could do without a woman.

"I don't want to drink all your good stuff." Roger set the glass down.

"Nonsense," David said. "That's what it's for. I didn't bring it back to sit and drink by myself. What's the fun in that?"

"I'm sure you've got some special friend that could appreciate this."

"Boy friend? You mean boy friend."

"Any friend. Whoever you know that might like this."

"Like you?" David sat down next to him. The little bar was basically a square hole in the wall between David's living room and his steamer trunk of a kitchen.

"I just meant--"

"I don't know what you meant. You won't have a drink with me? Is that what you mean?"

Roger did not fly anymore. Not professionally. He rented a plane once or twice a month, if the weather was nice. At the airlines, he was management. And it was not nearly as horrific as it once sounded. It was so non-horrific that he wanted to hang on to the post for another two years. Then he'd have his thirty in. Full pension. Full benefits.

All he had to do was stay sober. It sounded so easy. Not 'fly off into that jungle full of people shooting at you.' Not 'land this can of 200 women and children between two strips of lights you keep losing in the lighting flashes.' Just don't drink. How hard could that be? How fucking hard could that be?

Management was subjected to random drug tests. This was, to Roger, like putting acrophobics in the cockpit. A man picks a life style and a profession that matches. Why the hell should some twisted-ass, fair-to-all policy flip that sideways? Huh? He was a desk jockey now. If he had a beer at lunch, he'd what? Jam his finger in the phone?

The Porsche 911 burned a quart of oil every couple hundred miles. That was not optimal performance; it was what it was. Give it the oil and it ran wonderfully. Was that so wrong? A little extra to make it right? Roger understood that.

He should tell David he can't drink. It was honest and forthright. They—the program, the millions of people who saw his problems as re-runs of their own—they told him to be honest.

Roger looked at his son, David, across the two great seas of scotch. He'd learned not to look at a glass on its own. It was never just a sip, just a quick one, just a wee bit to get trim. He lost the ability to moderate years ago. Drinking was like flying. You couldn't do it halfway. That was called falling. For Roger, you were either high or grounded.

David took another sip. "I was given a bottle of Clynelish 20-year after designing a box for a special Johnnie Walker. That was the one that really swept me away. A real coastal, briny flavor, you know what I mean? And then you, at the wedding. I guess I never paid attention to what you drank. Or maybe I did. Maybe it was there in my subconscious someplace. Ever have a Clynelish?"

"Yes," Roger said. "Dalwhinnie, Bruichladdich, Rosebank - worked my way through the legends."

"Cool."

"Yeah, real cool."

"So when you've tasted a good number, can you really start to tell where they've come from? Are you one of those guys who can take a sip and say it's from the highlands or lowlands or an Islay?"

"I plotted them in my head. I had a mental terrain map of scotch whiskeys. Flavors for elevations. Distilleries for features."

"I'd love to know what you think of this one, in comparison to the others. When people talk about something

like 'smooth', it's relative. If I read a review, it's not like the writer and I have the same glass right in front of us. This is very cool."

He looks up to you, Roger's wife always said. Only he's just like you so he'd never show it. God forbid either one of you ever show anything remotely resembling affection.

"Then I moved to blends," Roger said.

"Really?" David's forehead creased, like the statement had sliced him across the forehead.

"Dewers, Johnny, whatever."

"You don't find them—I don't know—a little boring now."

"It didn't matter."

They tell you do change your habits. You're not going to stay sober hanging around your old friends. That's a fact. Change your life and your lifestyle. No drinking buddies, no matter who those drinking buddies are. Sometimes you've got to shoot the dog to get on with your life. People who've never done it don't know how difficult it can be to shoot something that doesn't have the slightest idea what's about to happen.

David raised his glass, "Here's to the good stuff."

Roger raised his glass, holding it right next to his son's. Not clinking, but hovering. The boy grinned, as he should have at a ball game or behind the stick of his first trainer. It was going to taste so hot and sweet. It was going to scorch across his tongue, smacking those buds out of hibernation. It was going to make him grin like his boy, who had not the slightest idea what was going on.

Roger poured his drink into David's. He'd have to explain that now, wouldn't he.

