

In the Drink

I now shun the very idea of drinking anything other than nice refreshing water after an intensive swim, it was not always the case.

My inauguration into working in the London insurance market was just as much one of how well I could hold my drink as of how well I could perform my job. Every lunchtime would involve drinking two to three pints of real ale at an ancient tavern on Fenchurch Street with perhaps a sandwich thrown in for good measure to provide some stomach lining, and then moving on to one of the wonderful City wine bars to drink as much as possible before they closed in those days at 3.00 p.m. My favourite of these haunts included the Grapeshots in Artillery Lane just off Frying Pan Alley, the whole area dating back to pre-Dickensian times and reeking of history; The George and Vulture mentioned many times in Dickens' drunken comedy Pickwick Papers and where Charles is supposed to have written most of that novel; The Jamaica Wine House next door and a favourite with the 17th Century diarist and probable alcoholic Samuel Pepys; and nearer to the office where I was based, the City Flogger in a basement off Fen court with its steep steps you could easily fall up and hurt yourself on your way out. (I know this because I entertained an insurance underwriter there who after three bottles of wine to drink fell and broke his jaw on the way out. Nothing was seen of him for six weeks after which he returned to work all patched up but with a permanent eye twitch which made him wink constantly. After a few days he disappeared again for another few weeks. It turned out he had been unwillingly winking at some yob on the train who had taken offence and once again broken his jaw for him.) The first evening Little thought was given to working in the afternoon as everyone in the office from senior management down would be similarly inebriated, the only difference being the calibre of the establishment you had been frequenting and the quality of the wine you had been imbibing which of course improved markedly as you rose through the company's ranks. The really top management even went to restaurants where you sat down and ate food!

This way of operating had carried on happily for three hundred years ever since ship owners started transacting insurance business in Edward Lloyd's coffee shop and until, just like in both World Wars and three years into my insurance career, the Americans came late onto the scene, bought up most of the insurance broking houses and tried to introduce their own work ethic. They simply wouldn't listen to the argument that all this drinking and socialising was where the business was actually being done. *(By the way, Lloyds of London had already been providing insurance for a hundred years when the American Declaration of Independence was signed, so who were they to tell us what to do.)*

In the company where I worked, one of the strict new rules for lowly staff was that unless you could prove to be with an actual client and you were seen to be drinking at lunchtime you could be dismissed. A cunning plan needed to be devised.

Now this new regime coincided with my elder brother Paul and I who both happened to work in the same building but for different divisions of the same broker, also having joined the Territorial Army, and as part of our keep fit programme we would go for a swim at 12.00 every lunchtime to the wonderful Victorian era Whitechapel Baths. Nothing much had changed in this establishment for decades to the point where the boiler would often break down and anyone who dared would be offered a free swim in the freezing water. They also had the old fashioned cages to put your clothes and valuables in and throughout the always cold corridors sound echoed due to the high ceilings and ceramic tiled walls. Paul and I would swim half a mile at a fairly swift pace, often to be overtaken by a mystery stunning blonde in an emerald one-piece bathing costume who like some storybook mermaid would appear in the water as if from nowhere, power past us swimming perfect butterfly and then disappear before we had finished. We never did find out who this vision was.

We would exit the Baths feeling fantastically fit, virtuous and with a warm glow both inside and out, imagining ourselves to be surrounded by a golden energy field like the children in a breakfast cereal advert on TV. Mid-winter was best of all when you could feel your skin tingle as you walked into the cold air and could stride along in just a suit jacket when everyone else was wrapped in coats, scarfs and hats. We also enjoyed as I still do, moistening and rubbing the backs of our hands after our swim and smelling the faint evocative scent of chlorine. *(We now know that wonderful smell is in fact from*

chloramines produced as a result of chlorine mixing with urine and sweat, but who cares, it smells great.) But after our exercise and it being now one o'clock and still lunchtime we would be desperate for refreshment, and so to quench our thirsts Paul and I would make our way purposefully to Aunty May's teashop and where upon our arrival we would loudly announce:

'Two teas please May'.

Aunty May's teashop (à la the Five Lamps Wine Bar) was so termed by Paul and I for two reasons. Firstly the old woman who worked behind the bar and whose real name we never bothered to find out because she happily answered to May, looked the image of the May who used to babysit for us and who was labelled Aunty May by our parents, possibly to make her seem kind, caring and trustworthy. And secondly, being aware of the horrid new restrictions upon us, she would serve us up ice cold Luncheon Dry sherry in white china tea cups, and from a special wine bottle capacity teapot she kept by just for us two boys. Imagine the satisfaction of standing at the counter being observed and scrutinised by miserable faced fellow employees, themselves having to subsist on fruit juice, whilst we acted as if we were simply drinking black tea but were in fact enjoying the wonderful sensation of ice cold liquid sherry coursing its way down and around our hot and parched insides, and feeling that nice mellow calming effect as the alcohol rapidly got to work on our dehydrated selves. Most lunchtimes we could manage a pot of tea each before the effects became too apparent and we moved on to tumblers of white wine cleverly disguised by being served from a lemonade jug.

The original May first started babysitting for us when we lived at West Wickham in the county of Kent in the south of England. That was a town renowned in my young life for having a dentist who didn't believe in using gas or injections to deaden the pain; a large jolly doctor who was a no nonsense sort of fellow who rather than send you to a specialist or to hospital, believed in sorting things out for himself which if that involved stabbing you with a sharp knife or cutting suspect bits off you he would do it there and then, using his huge bulk to good effect by sitting on you to restrain you whilst he hacked away (he had also been to the same grin and bear it school of pain control as the dentist); and a scary local woodland with a supposedly haunted lightning tree mentioned in the Domesday book, itself a name to conjure nightmares into an infant

head. It was also where Aunty May first introduced us to witchcraft and made terrifying goblins and other 'fairy' creatures run around my room and bounce on the bed at night.

It was Aunty May who first gave Paul and I the camouflaged teapot idea although it took some twenty years for us to realise our own version. From when we first knew her she would insist on only drinking anything from her own 'special' teapot which she always brought with her. Although we never tasted the contents, we knew it to be a brown liquid which smelt strong and made your eyes water if you tried to peer down the spout, and when empty she would top it up from a dark glass bottle kept in her copious bag. She also kept jars of pickled onions and beetroot in that bag and would sit watching TV with us munching from the jars, sipping her special tea and then farting loudly, always blaming the noise on there probably being someone at the back door in which direction she would look.

Her shouts of 'back door' would become more regular as the evening progressed as would her consumption of tea, and often we would wake in the morning to hear mother complain of having returned home to find Aunty May passed out and beetroot having been thrown at the walls. All was forgiven however, because being a witch she would tell the parents' fortunes and they believed every silly word she said.

When we were a few years older and my younger brother Timothy was also on the scene, we moved some distance away to Beckenham, and despite the inconvenience of having to go and fetch her Aunty May remained the main family babysitter, although another 'pseudo aunty' called Molly was sometimes brought in instead. I don't think Aunty Molly drank but she was very hairy, smelt bad, also farted a lot and would sometimes bring along her bearded little mother for company. These two had no idea how to control children and little interest in anything but watching TV so we would most often disappear for the evening getting up to all sorts of really bad mischief. But as Molly was a psychic and also told fortunes the parents once again forgave all faults. In fact Molly became the main babysitter after Aunty May refused to come any more, I remember her final evening with us.

Aunty May was in a bad mood because despite being forbidden to leave the house as he had been suspected of setting fire to a local cricket pavilion the previous evening, Paul (who May always referred to as a sod and a half) had laughed at her and gone out anyway. It was also a hot evening, I was insistent upon listening to 'Top of the

Pops' really loud on the TV and Timmy refused go to bed. I remember her getting crosser and crosser and drinking heavily from the teapot, and then when it was empty hugging and rubbing it like it had some genie inside. As the evening wore on and Paul still hadn't returned she started stamping round the house, shouting at Timmy and I, and she then shut herself in the lounge where we could hear her tinkling around in Dad's drinks cabinet, mumbling to herself, and occasionally screaming obscenities. As all this did was to make Timmy and I laugh we thought we would make things even funnier by quickly opening the lounge door, and letting Paul's pet budgie Sammy loose inside. Not only did Aunty May hate birds, she especially detested Sammy because he had been taught to sing 'Aunty May's a bastard' which of course he did over and over again as we wet ourselves giggling outside the door. This was too much for May. She threw open the door and stamped towards us threatening to kill us just as Paul came through the front door with two teenage friends. As May turned on them, Paul simply picked her up (he was bigger than her by now), and carried the struggling and screaming babysitter around the hallway, into the kitchen and then locked her in the pantry.

After that I seem to recall my parents gave up and simply left us to our own devices.