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THE JOY OF HANGOVERS

So you just couldn't resist trying a "Watermelon Surprise". Don't say you weren't warned.

There are better things than a hangover.

S. Tsow

It was the kind of day you wouldn't have been dead for a hundred bucks. Unless, of course, you had a force-10 hangover, which I did have, and I would've gladly shuffled off this mortal coil in exchange for 75 cents and the eternal promise of no more hangovers.

I did have a pretty good excuse, mind you, since I'd spent the previous night at a kind of informal wake, mourning the passing away of one Sid "Siddiqi" Davis, who had been crushed to death by a falling bargirl named Big Toy. That's all really only incidental, but given the state of my constitution, I figured Sid had taken the easier course, and I might have traded places with him even without the 75 cents.

But as I was saying, if I had to feel that way, I couldn't have picked a nicer day for it. It was unseasonably cool and clear, for Bangkok. At midday the sky was violently blue, with great white wads of cloud drifting gently across the firmament, taking care not to obstruct the sun as they did so. Lovely for sure, though of course the sunlight was driving spikes right through my eyeballs and into the back of my brain.

And from somewhere in the back of my brain rose the shape of a desperate resolve. For some months already I'd been threatening to run and row my way back to a 10-years-younger me, and this suddenly seemed as good a time as any to start. It might make me feel better, I told myself; and even if it didn't it would maybe kill me, which would be okay too.

Exercise is the only thing, in fact — aside from time and the gentle stroking of my fevered brow by understanding and lithesome young ladies — that has ever made me feel any better after a real night on the sauce.

As we get older, they say, we are supposed to get wiser, and to suffer correspondingly fewer hangovers. Even if we don't get any wiser, it is generally true that the severity of one's hangovers increases with age, so aversion to pain in any case tends to discourage what wisdom may not.

And I might mention another ugly truth about getting older: not only do the hangovers get more and more remarkable, the only real cures become harder to effect. That is to say, the ladies who are stroking your brow tend to get both less understanding and less lithesome, as time goes by, while exercise also becomes harder to get into and less effective besides. The best thing is not to have any hangovers, and that is the truth.

It has often been suggested that the existence of hangovers points to a basic flaw in the Scheme of Things (the late Sid Davis so argued, for one). But hope springs eternal. There is actually a worldwide fellowship — kind of a latter-day cargo cult — which devoutly believes that one day wise and talented beings from another galaxy will come to Earth bearing cures for both the Protestant work ethic and the common hangover. This, it is felt, should then allow Humankind to rest easy and settle down to its manifest destiny, which is the brewing and unconstrained appreciation of the Perfect Ale.

Yes, there is hope. But what is the common hangover, and what can be done about it while we wait for our Promethean friends from another world? First ask yourself this: where do hangovers come from, and how can you recognise one when it appears? Know the enemy.

I personally don't have any trouble recognising a hangover in the normal course of events. A real hangover always surprises you with the revelation that existence could harbour something this unpleasant, and furthermore causes you to think that if this is the case, then existence isn't everything it's sometimes cracked up to be, and you want out.

Different people are more or less susceptible to the headaches, stomach problems, and various other pains often associated with the syndrome. These discomforts are as nothing, though, when compared to the core symptom. This sensation is difficult to describe. Call it a malaise of the spirit, rather than the body. A soul-ache, perhaps. It seems to include equal parts of guilt, exhaustion, pain, and apprehension that it all might get still worse or, worse still, never get better. But the real test is this: Would you honestly and sincerely rather be dead? If the answer is yes, then it's probably a hangover.

But where do they come from? Most people believe that hangovers are caused by drinking too much alcohol. That notion, however, has by no means been established to everyone's satisfaction. Some would even call it an old wives' tale. Look at all the other factors involved. For one thing, a night on the town is going to take you into some pretty grotty atmospheres, places where you'll be breathing lots of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide and maybe even cheap perfume and stuff like that as well. And you're probably going to stay up way past your bedtime, so exhaustion has to be taken into account. Then there's the food; at what other time are you likely to find yourself eating half of pound of peanuts, an entire dish of deep-fried dried chili peppers, and a pint of Lek's first-ever attempt at garlic-pickle cheese dip? Who is to say which excess is responsible for what symptoms, and in what proportion?

My own brother, who is something of an expert, used to have a theory that booze didn't have anything at all to do with the hangover, and that it was really the smoking — he used to go through three or four packs of cigarettes in a good evening. If it weren't for that, he would say, there'd be no problem. Then one day, in the spirit of scientific enquiry, he gave up smoking. Imagine his surprise when he found he still got hangovers! So it was back to the drawing board.

One reflective Sunday morning not too long after that, he came up with a new improved theory — and this one, he claims, has so far resisted falsification: It's sleep that gives you hangovers. He wonders why no one has ever tumbled to this simple truth before. It's so obvious. You go out boozing and you feel just great; in fact, the more you drink, the better you feel. Right up to the time you go to bed, when you're still as happy as can be, and you're thinking this world is somewhat better than okay and isn't it a shame the night is so short. But then, before you know it, you're awake again and it's morning and if this isn't a hangover you're looking at, then it'll have to do till one comes along. So it's sleep that does it. As long as you never go to sleep, you'll never wake up with a hangover. And as long as you stay awake and keep drinking, you'll feel great. My brother has been known to keep the party going till noon the next day in a heroic attempt to thwart the demon Sleep.

Some of you may well query this logic, as sound as it might appear upon first hearing. I, myself, must admit to certain doubts. Indeed, I have seen with my own eyes at least one instance where a person definitely went from drinking to being hung over without so much as a moment's sleep intervening. I used to have a Japanese girlfriend, and on our first date I took her to a jazz concert at a pub in Oxford. I had a pint of beer and she ordered a sherry. As she explained it later, she didn't drink as a rule, and she'd only asked for the sherry so I wouldn't think she

was being unsociable. In any case, just a couple of minutes after she'd got her drink, I glanced around to see how she was enjoying the music, but she was nowhere to be seen. Hearing giggles, I looked down to find her disposed in a fairly relaxed heap on the floor. She was wearing a lop-sided expression and her face was bright red. When I lifted her to her feet, her legs kind of flopped away in different directions, and I had to plant her firmly in a chair for fear she'd collapse into a pool of protoplasm and run away through a crack in the floor. Before long her giggles wore off. She was still bright red, though whether it was mostly from the sherry or from embarrassment, now, it was hard to say. Then she rapidly became so ill I didn't even laugh.

I was flabbergasted at this lightning progression from one glass of sherry to legless inebriation to gruesome hangover. It was the sort of thing you almost wanted to ask her to do again, just so you could watch more carefully the second time. Only later was I to learn that this talent is shared by many Asians, and that it may be attributed to a tiny genetic difference between these people and the majority of Caucasians.

Normally alcohol is converted to acetaldehyde by the enzyme "alcohol dehydrogenase". If the acetaldehyde builds up in one's system, within minutes it produces the following syndrome: the face becomes hot and flushed, and this soon spreads to the entire body; a severe, throbbing headache then makes its appearance; finally, there can be difficulty breathing and nausea.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your attitude towards drinking, most Caucasians and quite a few Asians can successfully metabolise acetaldehyde, so these symptoms don't usually appear. Because of the genetic difference mentioned earlier, however, many Asians don't produce enough of the aldehyde oxidizing enzymes. The result is practically an instant hangover; and this is an excellent prescription for moderation. Many people will not drink excessively if they not only know they won't have a good time, but will also get sick as a dog almost immediately. It's cheaper, if you're into this kind of gratification, simply to slam your head in the refrigerator door a few times. I never knew my Japanese girlfriend, in all the years I saw her after that jazz concert, to have another drink. (In fact, there is a drug, Antabuse, which is sometimes used in the treatment of alcoholism; it prevents the acetaldehyde from being metabolised properly, and one drink after taking this drug will make a person quite sick.)

Most of us, however, are more favoured with the requisite enzyme and, hence, are less favoured in real terms of our vulnerability to hangovers. We should therefore take certain measures.

The one foolproof way to avoid hangovers, no doubt, is to be a teetotaller. The next best approach is to drink only moderately. I, for one, sometimes find moderation too radical a notion by half. So what else can you do?

One traditional bit of wisdom is that you should never "mix your drinks" the night before. The traditional riposte has been "Why not? Alcohol is alcohol; what difference does it make?" Although medical science has yet to give the theory a solid basis, it is possible that the various chemicals which lend alcoholic drinks their colour, smell, and taste may actually cause illness when taken in certain combinations. So alcohol is only alcohol, after all, but booze is not just booze; and mixing your liquor is probably to be avoided.

Scientists have suggested there are chemicals in wine and most liquors that can cause headaches and other unpleasant symptoms, even if you don't mix your drinks. Heavy red wines and brandy (especially taken together) are perhaps the most lethal. On the other hand, it is generally agreed that vodka is least likely to give you problems, since this drink has the fewest impurities. Many people would argue that gin is almost as innocuous, though with its reputation as an aphrodisiac, you might wake up with something even more annoying than a hangover.

Beer has the advantage that it's hard to drink enough of it to suffer from alcohol poisoning. The carbohydrates in the beer also slow the body's absorption of alcohol, so your judgment shouldn't become impaired as quickly as it might while drinking spirits. If you drink spirits and beer together, however, or so I've read, the carbonation in the beer actually speeds the absorption of alcohol through the intestine walls, and this is an excellent way to get zapped in a big hurry and to wake up really wishing you hadn't.

I've also heard it said that if you begin by drinking beer and then switch to whisky or rum, you are quite likely to keep drinking at the same rate that you were drinking beer, only now you've lost any real sense of how much actual alcohol is going down the hatch — a mistake from the standpoint of the morning after.

Alcohol stimulates the secretion of both saliva and gastric juices, which is why it's such a good appetiser. That's why it can also cause gastritis, bleeding of the stomach lining and even ulcers, eventually. Drinking all evening without eating is a sure

recipe for a surplus pool of acid in your gut, as well as a hangover which includes stomach problems.

It's a good idea to eat while you're drinking. You should take it easy on the pickled peppers and Lek's cheese dip, of course, but some nice stodgy food at regular intervals is definitely in order. First of all, and it doesn't take a medical degree to figure this out, food leaves less room for booze. Besides that, carbohydrates will sop up the hootch and slow the absorption of alcohol, thereby giving better judgment longer to kerb the born-to-boogie syndrome. They may also keep your blood-sugar levels up for the following morning's battle.

Boozing depletes certain vital nutrients, and it's probably true that you can do yourself no harm by taking vitamin C and vitamin B1 supplements before retiring. Some authorities believe one should take the vitamins before you go out, half-way through the evening, and then again before hitting the sack. These well-wishers may work for the manufacturers of vitamin tablets, however.

Drink lots of water, as well, especially at bedtime. Your whole system will be dehydrated. Alcohol causes your cells to lose water, which helps explain the frequency with which you sometimes have to visit the toilet in the midst of the festivities. It also blocks a secretion of the pituitary gland, resulting in decreased reabsorption of water.

Many people swear by aspirin before bed, as well. This is really only advisable, however, if you have a cast-iron stomach. Aspirin will exacerbate any gastric bleeding already brought on by the night's excesses.

Judicious exercise in the course of the celebrations is also a good idea, at least according to the recently departed Sid Davis. He used to recommend dancing and/or bar-room brawling, though he suggested an occasional run from the gendarmerie was also an effective way of burning off some of the booze while at the same time toning up the cardiovascular system.

So far, we've looked only at caveats and precautions, but what about after the fact? What can you do after it becomes clear that you didn't avoid a hangover, and you are wondering if you want to live to see another one?

Some people swear by a "hair of the dog". This expression, as you may know, refers back to an old superstition that the best cure for dog-bite is to swallow a hair from the same dog that bit you. By extension, many feel that if it's alcohol that has laid you low, a little more of the same the next morning is the antidote. Dangerous

advice. Unless you're careful, this prescription will only defer the hangover till later; and if you then use the same method of coping again, you've entered into a vicious cycle that will finally have your friends shocked and perplexed should they ever see you sober. "What was wrong with him?"

A little warm, flat beer the next day, mind you, probably does have a certain medicinal power. I once saw a film where, through the miracle of modern fibre optics, doctors introduced tiny lights and cameras into a bunch of hung-over stomachs. The stomach lining typically was an angry wrinkled red — something like the face of a new-born baby just after the kid's first rude introduction to existence via a resounding slap on the bottom. The scientists tried dumping various things like Bloody Marys into these wretched organs, which reacted immediately by scowling an even rawer shade of red. When a half-pint of warm flat beer was introduced, however, you could almost hear the sigh of relief as the stomach walls smoothed out and took on a nice healthy colour again.

Still, I suspect a little pain the next day is good for the soul. It has a certain deterrent value, and inspires a healthy reflection upon one's aims and priorities in life. Anyway, treating alcohol poisoning with alcohol tends to cause the body to begin producing more of the enzymes involved in alcohol metabolism. After a time, your system has all these little enzymes running around saying "Feed me; feed me" and, if you don't have any alcohol to metabolise, you feel uncomfortable. Not the way to cure a hangover.

Is there any real cure, then? I believe most doctors would say no, not beyond lots of water, rest, and time. Pilots sometimes swear by breathing pure oxygen from a tank; this is said to burn off some of the grunge in your system and clear the head in a hurry. Maybe so, but I've also heard that breathing too much oxygen is pretty unhealthy in itself.

My own experience has shown that lots of hard exercise is the only recourse that produces anything like a full recovery. You must remember, though, to drink plenty of water before, during, and after the workout. I guess this prescription is also one way to find out if you've got a heart problem, though you might not have a lot of time to digest the news if you do have a weak heart.

There is also a psychological hurdle to overcome: no matter how much experience has told me it works, the thought of crawling off my death-bed and into a pair of training shoes to make my way to the track can seem a ludicrously misguided plan of action.

Other than that, there's not much to say about hangovers. I could reveal the fact that I find a litre of ice-cold chocolate milk gulped in great draughts a salve for both body and soul, or that I chase the milk with a bottle of soda water, enjoying the scouring effect of all those icy little bubbles blasting down my throat. I'm sure the restorative properties of these things are mostly in the mind, but they work for me. A little soft music may help, as well, especially if you have some properly attentive and understanding company applying cold towels to your forehead, no doubt at the same time murmuring "There, there, you moron" and similar endearments.

In fact, if you can come to have faith in simple rituals like these, you can almost learn to enjoy a moderate hangover. Part of the pain of hangovers is simply the self-fulfilling expectation that they're going to be horrible.

Or you can try the kill-or-cure exercise therapy. Just remember: you win either way.

Finally, if all else fails, you should try sitting on the edge of your bed and rocking back and forth with your face in your hands, repeating "Oh, woe; oh, woe" in a soft monotone. Eventually, this will have a soothing effect, and you may even go to sleep. Be careful not to fall off the bed.

I never did get to sweat off the hangover that inspired this story. I got caught up in making these notes, and the distraction of writing plus, I suppose, the simple passage of time restored me to the realm of reasonably happy, reasonably sentient creatures.

I guess I'll start my fitness campaign next week. Right after my birthday party.