

Family Business

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When I was just a kid, my daddy took over the family business from his daddy. We were distillers from long back, carefully guarding the secret of our family recipe from any prying eyes. Our particular brand of whiskey, called "Coffin Liquor," was strong enough to raise the dead, if our label's motto was to be believed. I was raised around the stuff, and no curious boy past the age of ten could ever resist taking a snort or two in such surroundings.

The deep brown liquid packed a kick, let me tell you. I don't know if it was quite enough to raise the dead, but it was surely strong enough to put a person under like a corpse if he drank too much. Still, it had quite a unique flavor that I came to love and admire.

Now, ever since I was old enough to follow my daddy through the warehouse, he always warned me off of taking even baby sips of what he called "the product." Dangerous stuff, he said, too powerful for a child the likes of me. Still, boys will be boys, and I couldn't help myself. One day when daddy was in the warehouse office, I snuck away, pried open a crate, and pulled out one of the fat glass bottles.

Coffin Liquor had been made the same way for as long as anyone could remember, and tradition followed even to the bottling process. Where other companies switched to plastic caps and paper wrappers, Coffin Liquor bottles were still stopped with a cork, the tops sealed with drippy red wax. Except for the labels, which were now printed by machine instead of hand-lettered on parchment, the process hadn't changed in nearly six generations.

As I pulled that smooth cool glass bottle from the crate, I goggled at the ochre liquid inside. It was, and remains to this day, my favorite color, warm and rich. My hands shook as I tucked the bottle inside my jacket and ran out the back door of the warehouse and around the corner. If my daddy'd found me, he'd have whupped me good, but I couldn't resist. That beautiful brown was too inviting, almost intoxicating even before it touched my lips.

I broke the seal and used my pocket knife to tear the cork to pieces until I'd finally managed to dislodge it, then I closed my eyes and inhaled the most delicious scent I'd ever smelled. Better than a woman's perfume or a batch of home-baked cookies. It burned my nostrils and made my eyes sting with the cold vapors, but I could also catch a

hint of the taste in the scent, spicy and warm. It made me want to try it even more. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I put the bottle to my lips and lifted the bottle to the sky, letting just a swallow past my teeth. It bit into my throat as I swallowed it, burned all the way down until it came to rest, warm in my stomach. As that magic heat spread through my body, the feeling made me smile.

I managed to hide that bottle in the warehouse behind a few empty crates that seemed to always be lying about, and after a few months of visiting the warehouse every day, I managed to finish it off. Another bottle followed, as did another, and another as the years went by. If my daddy ever caught on, he never said. Only kept telling me that a good brewer doesn't drink away all his profit. At the time I thought I was putting one over on the old man, but now I figure he was letting me know that I wasn't getting away with anything.

When I turned twenty-five, my daddy asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I'd only barely managed to get out of high school, thanks in part to my family's whiskey keeping my studies from really taking root in my brain. College wasn't really an option, and besides, I told him, I only had one plan in mind. I wanted to follow in the family business. Coffin Liquor was my birthright, and although my father had never taken me to the actual brewery, I knew enough about the business end to keep carry on the family label. All I needed was the recipe and for my daddy to teach me the secrets of making that rich brown elixir I'd grown up to love. Yessir, I told him. A brewer was my father and his father before him, and a brewer I'd be just as well.

My daddy hung his head and nodded. He told me he'd hoped for better for me, but he understood. It was time I learned the process, and then for me to decide. I couldn't sleep that night. Visions of hops and barley ran through my mind along with giant copper vats and yeast, and my head fairly swam with the imagined scent of my family's life's blood.

Just after midnight, daddy knocked on the door to my room and told me to get dressed and follow him. It was time, he said. I didn't understand, but I was too excited about learning the recipe that I didn't really care that it was still pitch black outside. I was being trusted with the secret, just as he'd been trusted by his father before him. I hurried

to pull on my pants and shoes and almost ran to the pickup truck where my daddy sat waiting.

We rode in silence for what seemed like an hour toward the outskirts of town and beyond. I didn't dare ask where we were going because I didn't want to spoil the magic of anticipation. When we passed the town borders, I began to wonder just how secret the recipe must be, that it had to be kept so far away from prying eyes.

We pulled up at a stone wall that stretched off into the night. Parked along the wall were three other pickup trucks, all painted dull black without even a hint of shine. Daddy climbed out of the truck and motioned for me to follow. As we climbed up the wall, I saw three lanterns in the distance. Employees, daddy said. We were here to check on their progress. I never questioned why we were looking in on them at night, or what this place was. I assumed they were digging a special root from out of a secluded field that gave Coffin Liquor its distinct flavor. When one of the workers' shovel struck something solid, he waved the lantern, making my daddy's pace quicken. We made our way toward his light just in time to see the workers pulling a long metal box from out of the ground.

A coffin.

"Seven years," said the digger. "This one ought to be ready."

The other three hoisted the coffin from the ground and, as my father approached, shook it from side to side. From inside, I heard a sloshing sound.

It was part of the putrefication process, my daddy explained. As the body began to rot, parts of it just turned to liquid. The longer a body stayed in the ground, the longer it fermented. It was a tricky process, though. Leave them in too long and all that was left was stained linen and dust. Not long enough and there would not be enough of the coffin liquor to fill a bottle, and it wouldn't pack the right amount of punch.

I watched in horror as my daddy took something from his pocket, a metal spigot with a spike on one end. One of the workers handed him a mallet, which he used to drive the spike into the foot of the casket. Never, he explained, take it from the head end. Driving the spigot from there ran the chance of piercing the skull, which would foul the whole batch.

The workers tilted the coffin toward the spigot, which poured the liquid into a bucket. When the last drippings were out, one of the workers handed my daddy a small dipper. He stirred the contents of the bucket then brought the ladle to his lips and took a sip. His body shuddered as the taste hit him, then he opened his eyes and motioned for me to do the same. The scent hit me first, that same burning and intoxicating scent I remembered from my youth, the one I'd never forget.

"It's a little raw yet," he said as he passed me the ladle. "Still has to be filtered, but have a snort."

Tasting Coffin Liquor from the bottle made me love it from my youth. Tasting the coffin liquor straight from the source, however, was a feeling I'll never forget, euphoric and sensual. It poured down my throat, warming my body like a lover, touching me in ways I'd never experienced, or even imagined, from mere alcohol. I opened my eyes to find my father's sad expression. He never wanted this life for me, but now that I'd tasted, I could never go back. He left the decision in my hands, and I wanted this life for my own.

I glanced back toward the flat smooth stone that bore the name and age of the cask. It was a woman's name, aged somewhere in her forties. The other lights waved, signaling the plucking of more casks from the ground. One was a man in his fifties, the other, a mere child of ten, each with their own distinctive flavor.