

TOM'S STRANGE ENCOUNTER

Tom had not seen Peter since they were at school together – and that was how many years ago? Thirty years was it? He thought a little and realized it was closer to forty. They had once been close friends but had drifted apart as each had gone off to different universities. Maybe he should have made more effort to keep in touch.

Now by mere chance, since each was attending a different conference, they found themselves staying in the same hotel. They agreed to meet in the bar that evening.

"Hi, Pete!" said Tom. "Fancy bumping into one another like this after all this time. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"That we have," agreed Peter. "But first let me get you a drink. A beer?"

"Ugh, no thanks," said Tom. "I've never been able to understand why so many people enthusiastically ingest something that looks and smells so much like a human waste product. No, a glass of white wine for me, please – the house wine will be fine."

"OK. Everyone to their own poison, I suppose," said Peter, and went off to the bar. He returned with Tom's wine and a pint of stout for himself.

"What have you got there?" asked Tom.

"It's my beer," replied Peter. "an Irish stout. I must say I hope none of your waste products look that. But," he added, nodding towards Tom's white wine, "well..."

He said no more as Tom said: "All right, all right."

They both laughed. They had a lot to talk about. They had both married since they had drifted apart; they had had children and Peter now had two grandchildren. They talked and drank till late in the night.

As they were taking leave of one another to stagger off to their rooms, Peter said, "You're so wrong about beer, Tom. It's the very drink of the gods. You'll be sorry you had all that wine."

"Tosh," retorted Tom. "G'night!"

Somehow or other Tom found his way to his room and got to bed. He slept soundly but, waking up around dawn, he was startled to see a woman in his room. She was rather strangely dressed and he certainly did not recognize her.

"Oh my gosh!" he thought. "I didn't bring her along last night, did I! What if the wife finds out!"

The lady smiled, then she said: "Don't worry. I've only just arrived."

"B-b-but," stammered Tom, "the door's locked. Or at least I think it is. I didn't hear it open."

"Goddesses don't need doors," she said. "I come and go as I please."

"Goddess?" said Tom, pinching himself to make sure he was not dreaming, "Goddess? What do you mean 'goddess'? Who are you?"

"I am Ninkasi," she said. "The Lady who fills the mouth. I was borne of the flowing water and cared for by Ninhursag, Lady of the mountains. My father is Enki, Lord of Creation, and my mother is Ninti, Queen of the sacred lake."

"Hold on, hold on," said Tom, realizing that perhaps one should not say 'hold on' to a goddess. But he did not know quite what to say.

"Enki?" he queried. "Enki? Wasn't he the great god of the Sumerians – the one the Akkadians later called Ea? We're talking about thousands of years ago."

"That's right,:" said Ninkasi. "The Sumerians were great beer drinkers. So, for that matter, were the Akkadians after them. I am beer divinized. But *you*" – and she gave Tom a hard stare, – "*you* said something quite puerile, ignorant and insulting about beer, about *me*, last evening."

"I – I'm sorry" said Tom in confusion. "I – I didn't mean to insult *you*. I mean, 'beer divinized?' – 'a *goddess*?' – I mean – er – beer is a man's drink, isn't it?"

Ninkasi replied with contempt: "In ancient Sumer it was *everyone's* drink; and it was *women* who brewed the beer."

"What?" said Tom. "Are you really telling me that five thousand years ago women were brewing beer in southern Mesopotamia, the place we now call Iraq?"

"They were," Ninkasi replied. "But even longer ago than that. They'd been brewing ever since your early neolithic ancestors discovered beer some 11000 years ago."

"D-d-discovered beer?," stammered Tom again. "What do you mean 'Discovered beer'?"

"When," replied Ninkasi, "hunter-gatherers got surplus barley grains, they baked them in order to store to make porridge during the winter. It was found that they were sweeter if the grains had begun to germinate before baking; so they discovered malt."

"Yes," said Tom, "but malt is not the same as beer."

"But if it is forgotten," said Ninkasi, "and gets moistened it will begin to ferment and so beer was discovered. Indeed, it was probably the desire to ensure they would have barley for making beer that led humans to settle between the Euphrates and Tigris way back in prehistory."

"All right," said Tom, "so you're telling me that people have been drinking beer for 11000 years or so. But haven't they been drinking wine for a similar time?"

"No, not at all. It came several centuries later," said Ninkasi. "It was an interloper from the hill country. "

"Maybe," agreed Tom. "But when it came, it surely displaced beer. I mean, begging your pardon, it's a much nicer drink."

"Not when it tastes like vinegar," said Ninkasi sourly. "Sure, you can get good wines, but you can also get some very nasty ones. The malted barley drink came early and remained the favorite in ancient Mesopotamia. Why, even as late the 3rd century of your Christian era, Sextus Julius Africanus observed that Dionysos had refused to settle among the Babylonians and teach them how to cultivate the vine because they were such incorrigible beer drinkers."

"Oh," was all Tom could reply. He sat there, thinking.

"But," he said at last, trying to find of a way of scoring a point, "it must

have been pretty boring for them. I mean there couldn't have been much variety in old time beer, could there?"

"Oh, you really are very ignorant, aren't you?" replied Ninkasi. "Of course there was variety. There were cloudy beers and refined beers; white, red, brown and black beers; beers of superior quality and those of lesser quality; sweet beers, very sweet beers and less sweet beers; beers a year old, beers that were older; beers"

"OK, OK," interrupted Tom. "You've made your point."

"Yes," said Ninkasi, "beer is the world's oldest alcoholic beverage and still in your modern world it is the third most popular drink after water and tea."

"OK," said Tom, "I know what I said last evening was puerile and, I guess, ignorant as well. I really am sorry you were insulted."

As he finished speaking, he noticed a yeasty, malty smell beginning to pervade his room – a smell which he was finding pleasant and enjoyable. He thought he heard singing. He listened in wonder and, indeed, he did hear singing. Were the voices singing in Sumerian or English? Tom was not certain, but he did know he understood the words:

"Oh, gakkul beer, you gladden every liver!

"Lamsarë beer, you set our hearts aquiver!

"Ugurbal jar, that gives the house good cheer!

"Oh sagub jar, we love you filled with beer!

"Oh vessels fine and ready on your stands,

"To you our chorus rings through all the lands:

"Our livers are happy, our hearts full of joy!"

"Our livers are happy, our hearts full of joy!"

Then Tom noticed a light glowing around Ninkasi and the voices took up a different, more solemn strain:

"Ninkasi, borne of the flowing water,

"Ninhursag tended thy childhood days.

"Hail to thee, Inti's beloved daughter!

"Enki's child, worthy art thou of praise."

There followed a hymn of many verses, during which Ninkasi began fading, rather like Alice's Cheshire Cat, until all was silent in the room and only a faint hint of Ninkasi's smile remained with a malty scent of yeast.

Tom rubbed his eyes and pinched himself again. Had Ninkasi been there, or had he been dreaming? He did not know.

Later he met Peter at breakfast.

"Hello, Tom," said Peter, and laughed as he added: "You're a bit late. I told you all that wine wouldn't do you any good."

"Yes, Pete," replied Tom. "I think I'll be trying your stout this evening."