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Robert Joy

The Mission Orange I Remember

“Helmsman, bring her hard to starboard and reduce the speed to twenty-knots. Steady as she goes, seaman. Call me when the squadron returns, I’ll be in my cabin,” the captain would say.

“Eye, eye captain,” I’d answer, as I would essentially take charge of the gigantic lumbering aircraft carrier while the captain was away. “Eye, eye, asshole,” I’d say to myself, because one of these days I’ll be ordering some wet behind the ears sailor to hold it steady while stepping into my cabin for a shot of rum or a piss or a nap. The captain can do that, because he has the power. He can step away from the wheel and leave someone else to steer, but by god he’s still in charge of the lumbering beast and no one dare step up to challenge his authority.

“Eye, eye,” is the only thing I would want to hear from my crew, if I ran the Mission Orange Bottling Company of Garden City, Kansas. The building looked like a giant gray battle ship to me. The full glass windows with pipes and pullies and knobs behind them, looked to me like the guts of a warship. I drove past the place on the way to school, every day with dreams behind my boyhood eyes. If only I could get a job there!

Well, by god, one day I just walked in the front door as if I owned the place. No one stopped me and I found myself next to the machinery. It looked like the giant engine of the ship I thought it powered. I longed to hear it run and churn and clank and snort and all the other things warship engines were supposed to do. At this moment it was silent. The only thing I noticed was a dribbling from a faucet as water dripped on to the floor, leaving a splatter mark and a miniature river meandering toward a drain in a floor. It could have been a giant engine for all I knew. I’d never seen it run; so why not an engine?

I walked deeper into the hull and found myself in a long narrow hallway bordered on both sides by stacks of Pepsi, Mission Orange, 7up, and Mason’s Root Beer soda pop. To me the stacks were torpedos and cannon shells, after all, this was a battle ship. I’m sure it was named after a great American battle ship of the epic war of 1812, when the British Navy set fire to Washington D. C.

At the end of this long hallway I saw the admiral standing under a large raised doorway looking out at the alley way. I pondered how I should approach the man. Should I smartly strut up to his side, snap to attention and shout, “Eye, eye sir. Robert reporting for duty, sir” or should I make a small clearing of the throat, so he knows I’m behind him? I decided to clear my throat, but a small piece of glass betrayed my plan when I accidentally kicked a shard across the tarmac. The glistening bullet of bottle glass spun past the man’s shoe like a cockroach when the lights are turned on. I was suspended in time as the the Admiral turned to look at me. I was speechless. I was breathless, I was looking stupid, thus spoiling my first impression.

The Admiral didn’t say a word. He just stood there with his cigarette in his hand and waited for my next move. I was still suspended in stupidity. The man brought his cigarette to his lips and took a short drag and then put his hand back to his side with the cigarette still between the same two fingers. The Admiral waited for the idiot to speak.

“Aw... a... Sir, I was wondering if you were hiring at the moment,” I said like some school kid asking the teacher if I could go to the potty. I wouldn’t have blamed the Admiral one bit if he answered, “Number one or number two?” He didn’t. He just stood there and took another drag on his cigarette still planted between his two first fingers. I stood there drooling and wiping myself with my shirt sleeve. He stood there and looked up and down me like a butcher does a new cut of beef fresh off the delivery truck.

“If I was, who wants to know,” answered the Admiral.

“I want... I mean... I’m Robert Joy and I mean... I want to know if you need anyone to work here... aw, I was wondering if you were hiring anyone to help out during the summer?” Jesus, that was light years away from the snappy approach I was expecting from the practice I’d thought of word for word, before coming onto the great battle ship, Mission Orange.

The Admiral brought his cigarette up to his lips and took a final drag. He lowered his hand with the still very long, unused, smoldering butt between the same two fingers, stepped two steps to the side of the doorway and flipped the smoking paper butt into the center of the alley. He stepped back and said only one thing, “We pay a dollar an hour. Be here at 8:00 o’clock in the morning.”

I was on board. The Admiral liked me. The Admiral wanted me. I didn’t screw up as bad as I thought I had. I danced out of the building like a kid with a new pack of bubble gum. I was going to be working at the Mission Orange Bottling Company for the summer. I had no idea what I was expected to do. I didn’t start worrying about all that stuff until I went to bed. The second my head hit the pillow, my mind started to churn as I started worrying about everything I was expected to

do. My head churned and turned all night long as I tried to reassure myself that everything will be all right... It will be all right, It will be all right, It will be all right. It must have been well past three o'clock before I lost consciousness.

The actuality was worse than the dreams. I found myself outside on a giant concrete slab that resembled nothing of a great battle ship. The sun was high up in the morning sky and burning my tender skin on its lengthy climb across the day. It was going to be a very long voyage and I was sure I was not going to survive the first day. Two other kids came out. They were older and I didn't know them, because they turned out to be from the Catholic School. I didn't know any of the kids from the St. Catherine's School. One was named Cleo and the other Gerald. Both of them had been hired the day before, but they knew what to do and proceeded to show me how to sort the bottles.

We were lined up behind a large piece of railing like the kind they used to push boxes down off the back of a truck. It had legs with wheels welded on the rack. It was set between two long double rows of unsorted soda bottles. It would be our job to sort all those bottles and stack them neatly into nice clean sorted palets... GO!

Bottles of all sorts of sizes and shapes. We were to put the eight ounce Pepsi bottles in one box called a "Shell" and at the same time sort out the twelve ounce, sixteen ounce Pepsi bottles all into nice neat rows. Sort out the eight and twelve ounce Mission Orange, Grape, and Strawberry into Mission Orange Shells. Then the same for the Mason's Rootbeer and the other companies bottles, the odd ball brands, and the ones full of dead grasshoppers, toilet paper, human urine, broken and cracked tops. Don't cut your hands or drop the shells on your toes and don't stop because you're tired and sweating like a dog, or because you can tell by your watch it's only ten o'clock with two more hours until it was noon time.

No goddamned stopping, because this is the first day and there will be no screw-ups on the first day, because this might be the only day... the last day. I sorted like a fool. I got better and better and faster and faster. The two other guys, Gerald and Cleo were starting to poop and play like they were the old guys having been hired the day before and knew all the ropes and the ins and outs of the soda pop business, and maybe they did know the mind of the Admiral.

Cleo went over to the end of the metal rack and sat his big fat ass on the end like a show off on the diving board. He pulled up a case of odd bottles with cracks, chips and broken tops and the brand labels none of us had ever heard of before. Cleo started tossing each one into the trash barrel with a crash of glass as one bottle hit the next. He'd been shown this the day before and now was the company expert on bottle disposal. I kept on sorting. Maybe slower and less enthusiastic, but still sorting.

Cleo was laughing and telling jokes as he broke bottles in the barrel. His big ass rolled up and down the rack at each thrust. Gerald was laughing and pushing more disposable bottles toward Cleo like an ammo carrier. About that time I saw the Admiral coming out of the office and walk in our direction. I nudged Gerald with a long bottle of something and directed his attention to the approaching danger. Gerald tried to get Cleo's attention by tossing a piece of wood from one of the broken shells, but it missed and clattered to the concrete below Cleo's feet. Cleo didn't notice the Admiral and the boss caught him cold handed.

Cleo tossed and broke the bottles one by one with an accompanying dialog of crazy school kid shit. He laughed between crashes and made all sorts of stupid sounds like sheep, horses and pigs. The Admiral (now a very disgusted boss) was standing behind Cleo, puffing on his cigarette and bringing his hand down from his lips with the white smoking torpedo between the same two fingers.

"What in hell are you doing?" asked a voice that sounded like the wrath of god, and it was the wrath of god all right. Cleo froze like a deer in the headlights. The last bottle crashed at the bottom of the barrel. I kept sorting as if nothing was happening. Gerald kept sorting.

"Get off that track and get your sorry butt to sorting or you can walk the hell out of here right now. I don't have time for this crap and I don't want to see it happening again. Got that?"

"Well, Mike told us to break all those bottles when we came across them. I was just breaking the bottles, sir." whined out Cleo's excuse. Mike was the plant foreman and he wasn't around at the time. I hadn't been introduced to Mike yet and now, I wasn't sure I wanted to meet him.

"I don't give a crap what Mike told you do. I want you on your damned feet. I don't pay you people to sit around on your lazy butts and toss bottles like a bunch of idiots. Go talk to yourself on your own time. I'm trying to run a business here." The boss walked off toward his office and as he opened the screen door he looked back at us and stared at us with a stare that told me not to get caught sitting down again. Cleo was scared out of his wits and started sorting again and didn't say another word.

We got done with that mountain of bottles just a short time before noon. It had to be well over a hundred degrees out on that slab. My tee shirt is stuck to me like glue and a ring of white salt has formed a nice upside down rainbow under the

neck and across the chest. I've lost a gallon of water out of the top of my head and all I want is some place cool to hide. We could have all the pop we wanted. We were surrounded by it, but none of it was cold. A whole building of soda pop and not one bottle was cold. We could have all the hot soda we could drink. Like sea water, we drank it, but it just made us that much more thirsty. The only time we got cold pop was when the cooler repair man was testing out one of the water coolers and we'd put our bottles in there when he wasn't looking.

That first day was hell and so was the second day. The third the same and the same and the same as the week went on. No one quit, but there was a lot of complaining. This job wasn't like a battleship. It was hell and the pay sucked and Cleo thought he deserved a pay raise, but he couldn't find the guts to go ask the boss for one. We swept the floors when we weren't sorting bottles. We loaded trucks when we got finished with the sweeping. We carried one hundred pound bags of sugar up the stairs when we weren't loading trucks and just as the afternoon hit the hottest place in the sky, the first trucks returned from their sales routes.

Around five o'clock, here they'd come. The boss (by now we were calling him Dave behind his back) would get up from his giant desk inside his tiny little office and stand in the window as the trucks would slide down the alley and pull up on the concrete slab. They would rumble and bang on the potholes making all the empty bottles rattle. We could hear them from the farthest end of the building. We'd all drop whatever it was we were doing and run to see which driver made it back first.

We'd all run out and scramble around the truck like an air crew. We'd start taking off the empties and putting them on giant carts and pulling them away to the sorting rack and bring back a new one to load. Then another truck would come gliding down the alley and we'd do the same for that one until they were all safely back on deck. The drivers (salesmen) would jump out of the cabs like the pilots I'd seen on the movies and start unloading and counting the empties they brought back and they would inventory the product they still had on board their trucks.

Dave would be out there for the whole operation. He made sure everything ran smooth, made sure the trucks got loaded. The drivers grumbled and complained to one another. Dave made sure those trucks were clean inside and out and made sure everyone was working and no one was sitting on their butt. We all grumbled and complained about how hard he made us work and we all deserved a raise.

One thing Dave didn't like was seeing someone sitting down doing nothing. The only one who sat down on this cruiser was the Captain and by god the trucks got loaded, the trucks got cleaned and the drivers complained. The trucks were all backed into the driveway between the rows of soda pop, the bottles were sorted and everyone complained about the unfairness of it all and we should be all getting raises for all the work we had to do. The floors were swept and the doors were pulled down and locked at seven o'clock and we all headed for home and no one ever complained about that..

Cleo finally went - got fired, dropped dead - who the hell knows? Gerald finally went to work for a factory where he stayed for fifty years walking around a giant paycheck with one shoe nailed to the floor. It took a few minutes to replace those guys with new guys. It would have taken the same amount of time to replace me. We came and went like fleas on a dog. Now it was Jake and Jerry, then Tory, Phill, William, Tony and on and on like a giant wheel, they climbed on and got off at the other end. Some stayed a day, some a week, some stayed on like me.

The best part was running the bottling machine. The instant Mike (the plant foreman) pushed the buttons, pulled the levers and the machine busted to life for the first time to my ears and eyes, the whole world changed. It was like being in the bottom of a battle ship or the insides of an atomic submarine - knobs and levers and buttons. It whined and clanked and needed constant attention. It was giant gray machine consisting of a bottle washer, a series of belts and tracks the bottles moved along and the part that filled the bottle with syrup, and the part that put in the carbonated water, and the part that pressed on the crown.

Mike became an old salt going to show the new recruits the way of the fighting ship at sea. "Pull that lever there, boy, and push that button and watch her sing," and the big wheels started moving. I could hear the sound of the Admiral's voice come crackling down the speaking tube. "Full speed ahead! Right full rudder." God, we'd be down there in the hole for the rest of the day dashing from one part of the room to the next, trying to keep everything running smooth. Mike was a master and knew all the things the machine was capable of doing. He'd kick something and reach over to adjust something else. Mike could see a bottle trying to jam up on the track and flick it along before anything adverse could happen.

Mike or I would run from the line and jump on the fork lift to push up another pallet of empty bottles and take away a pallet of fulls. No sooner than that was finished, one of us would run upstairs to the syrup room, tear open a box of new crowns, lean over the balcony and pour another lot into the hopper before they could run out and stop the production.

We'd finish late in the day and clean the decks and put the beast to bed just as the first truck would be returning from its daily mission. The crew would run out on the deck to recover the craft as each one would complete its victory pass and

land on the concrete deck. The Pilot would emerge from the cockpit, cocky and full of stories as he pulled the scarf from around his neck and take off his helmet. Everyone would scramble to re-arm the ships, before the enemy could spot our position and mount a counter attack. It was our job to remove the expended ordinance and re-arm the ships. We'd toss in case after case of fresh shells. As the day closed the pilot knew exactly what he would be needing on the next run.

The whole time I could look up at the bridge and all those windows and I would see Dave standing there like the Admiral he was. He'd be standing there with his cigarette between the same two fingers watching us. I'd be loading the trucks and the guys around me would be complaining about not being paid enough and how hot it was and why in hell doesn't Marvin get his ass in from the route so we can get all this finished to go home early.

Where the hell was Marvin? He's always late and he's a pain in the ass. Why doesn't Dave just fire the guy and get someone else faster at the job? Then, or eventually, someone would spot Marvin and everyone would cheer as he made his final approach and lands. We pile around his ship like a swarm of ants and pull off the empties and reload the ship while Marvin would be up on the bridge explaining and complaining about the job. Dave would just listen, take a drag on his cigarette and then tell him that's the way the cookie crumbles and like it or leave it. Marvin would come back to the flight deck and grumble with the rest of us while we finished up the loading. We'd complain, but in the end, we'd pull down the doors to the great ship and go home for the night.

That was the Mission Orange I remember!

The End