

First Drunk

by

H. David Whalen

Seventeen is an awkward age in a young man's life. He is still shy of adulthood yet mentally ready to refuse advice and make his own decisions. It is an age of experimentation.

I knew Doug since the seventh grade and met Bill on the first day of high school. By the age of seventeen, we were high school juniors – men who ruled our corner of the world.

We were cool, owned our own cars, and had an image to uphold. A teenager's reputation is more important than food.

Before this, I'd tried beer a couple of times and weed only once, unlike most of my friends, who experimented with numerous drugs. These minor infractions were enough to solidify my standing with my peers.

I was careful about weed. I was unimpressed by the effect when I'd tried it, but my main concern, being a Green Card carrier and not an American citizen, was that any illegal drug use was a felony, making it a deportable offense. If I were with a group of friends and someone pulled out weed, speed, mescaline, or any other illegal drug, I would immediately make an excuse and leave the area. If I walked into a party and there was even a hint of drugs, I would make a beeline to the exit. Having lived in America since I was eleven and considered it my home, I wanted to keep living here.

Late in the second semester, I was hanging out with Doug and Bill during the lunch period when Bill told us that we should get drunk. His older sister would buy us a bottle. Like the other two, I thought that was an excellent idea. Plans made, and money exchanged hands. We were set for Saturday night.

The remainder of the week felt like an eternity. Finally, D-day was upon us. At eight o'clock that evening, I climbed into my eight-year-old Chevy pickup and headed for the rendezvous. When I met up with my compadres, at the Atlantic Richfield gas station where Doug worked, Bill proudly exhibited the ill-gotten quart of Bacardi rum. We were ready to roll!

What now? Where do we go? And when we get there, do we drink the rum straight or mix it? If we mix it, what do we use? Our plan not as well conceived as we thought. Decisions had to be made. Unanimously we decided to drive thru Jack In The Box and buy large Cokes, mix in the rum, then just drive around indulging. It was a terrible plan but nonetheless was a plan. We headed to the nearest fast food location.

Taking our purchases back to my truck, we sat in their parking lot pouring ninety percent of the Coke from our paper cups onto the asphalt and replaced it with rum.

Phase one complete; we proceeded to phase two. We hit the popular cruising route around Main Street and Second Avenue. After a couple of laps, sipping our rum-tinged with a hint of Coke, Bill asked us if we were drunk yet. Both Doug and I responded negatively. Bill then suggested that we go to Outer Limits and do a little jogging and jumping jacks, figuring that exercise would speed up the process. We eagerly agreed.

Outer Limits is the stage for urban myths. Our Outer Limits was a small dirt road that wound through the thick, tall dry grass and the goat-head stickered low lying-hills of East El Cajon. The teenage legends included a resident Monk who killed bicycled riding kids, an old shotgun-toting maniac who slaughtered everyone, and the ever-popular Hook-Hand stalking young lovers. It was the perfect spot for serious drinking!

We arrived twenty minutes later, drinking all the way. All left was to finish our paper cups full of booze and start jogging in the bright, full moonlit night. It worked. We soon felt as drunk as-lords. Mission accomplished!

Doug, Bill, and I leaned against the tailgate of my truck for a while, slurring unfunny jokes and laughing our heads off.

We did not yet realize that trouble was stalking just around the corner.

It began when I noticed a set of car lights moving in and out around the corners below the hills in front of us. We threw our cups and almost empty bottle, into a small adjacent field. There was no place to turn around, so I started driving towards the oncoming lights. A quarter mile later, I rounded a corner to come face-to-face with the impending intruder. I applied my brakes and quickly came to a full stop on the dirt road. The patrol car's lights immediately went on and started flashing red. We were caught!

Three more patrol cars, immediately, appeared behind us; all flashing red lights. It must have been a slow crime night if all four of the El Cajon City Police vehicles on duty had time to surround three teenagers in one pickup truck.

The officers behind us exited their patrol cars and start searching both sides of the road with their flashlights. The officers, even though wearing their thick black leather boots, would not venture far into the dry thorny laden field fearing the tedious job of removing the goat-heads from their uniform pants.

The officer in the front vehicle, shouting into his PA system, ordered me to exit my vehicle.

The mountain-sized officer wearing a perfectly pressed, navy blue police uniform emerged from his patrol car. Momentarily he stood beside the open vehicle's door studying the scene and his three young perpetrators. Sporting short cropped, jet-black hair glistening under the bright moonlight, he projected the perfect image you would expect to see on a late night horror film.

He called me over. I was terrified. I approached his patrol car and slyly pressed my thigh hard into his vehicle's fender to stabilize myself. This would be a lousy time to stagger around like some kind of sloppy drunk.

He approached in a regimented marching gate stopping directly in front of me. I stood alone beneath the intense, glaring red lights, repeatedly flashing on and off, and the concentrated glare of this intimidating monster man.

The officer snapped, "Why did you turn your lights on?"

I hadn't. They'd been on but obscure until we'd driven around the corner and stopped. The officer had no idea that I'd already driven my truck far away from the scene of our crime. The other officers' search for evidence of our excessive alcohol consumption would be in vain.

I answered confidently, "I didn't want you to run into me!"

His second question was harder, "What have you been drinking?"

I responded with the blatant lie, "Nothing."

Next, he barked, "Blow into my face!"

Protruding my upper lip over my lower lip, I blew straight down. It did not work; he saw right through my clever ruse and forced to re-blow directly into his face.

He smelled the alcohol on my breath and asked again, "What have you been drinking?"

My next lie, "My parents were having a small party, and I snuck a little taste." I couldn't possibly admit these three skinny, underage youths had downed a quart of Bacardi in less than an hour.

Unconvinced by my attempt to minimize my crime, he asked, "Can I search your truck?"

With nothing to hide I replied, "Of Course."

A minute later, the officer slammed the empty rum bottle onto the hood of my truck. I could only mutter, "Shit!"

Doug, not wanting to lose the last half-inch of liquid gold, had stuffed the bottle under his seat instead of tossing it with the paper cups. He indeed wasn't the criminal mastermind I could depend on.

The officers terminated their fruitless search for evidence in the grass. Thanks to Doug, they had all the evidence they needed to incriminate us. My officer dismissed them, and they left the scene, leaving only the monster standing between freedom and me.

My officer mimicked a drill sergeant teaching a new recruit as he leaned in close; his face only inches from mine. To my utter dismay, he never mentioned the ill fate of youths who got drunk. Instead, I endured a good half hour of screaming, decrying my ability to lie to authorities, and expounding on the seriousness of that critical character flaw.

The louder his volume increased, the more I saw my chances to gain my freedom shrink. But weirdly, concluding my chastising, the officer simply screamed, "Get in your truck and go straight home! Don't ever let me catch you again!"

I silently vowed that he never would. I jumped back into my truck, where Doug and Bill had remained sitting quietly through my ordeal, and as quickly as my drunken state permitted, I drove off. After dropping my two accomplices at their respective homes, I drove home alone.

The only remaining hurdle was to sneak past my parents. So far it had been a lucky night for me, and my luck was about to continue. It was close to eleven o'clock, and my parents had already gone to bed. Without hesitation, I snuck through the quiet house and did the same.

My parents never knew about my first drunk or my close brush with the law.

For a long time, I wondered why he freed us. I came up with numerous scenarios, none that would ever come close to reality and I can only surmise my stabilization trick against the officer's patrol car had worked and he never realized how genuinely drunk I was.