

English 120  
Professor William Broun

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—John Thornton

### Reindeer Bells

by John Thornton

I've never taken drugs, but the summer after senior year I became a dealer. It was a good summer job. I received \$10.27 an hour, I worked in air conditioning, I had a half hour lunch, and all I had to do was sell liquor.

In 2004, the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board's income was \$1,388,117,246.<sup>1</sup> When people are happy, they drink. When people are sad, they drink. Rich people drink; poor people drink; even homeless people drink. It's a recession-proof commodity.

This was my first job, and I needed to be taught how to work a register, buff floors, and bullshit. "How ya doin'?" "Staying cool out there?" "The Sutter Home is on sale next week." People love that talk. Customers would say very personal things to avoid the silence. One man "came out" to me, another told me he was about to divorce his wife. I would only meet them for thirty seconds, maybe a minute, but they would spew it at me. They needed to confess as they bought their instrument of sin.

My General Manager was Ron Nelson. He was 6'5, 260 pounds, and I could always see his last three meals dribbled down the front of his shirt. His head was like a dropped watermelon, and he was mostly bald except for a patch of black hair left to reduce the glare. When I arrived on my first day, he was eating lunch. It was a two liter bottle of birch beer and an entire pack of hotdogs, uncooked and still half in the plastic. He stood up, wiped his hands on

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<sup>1</sup> PLCB, "Fiscal Year 03-04 Summary," May 19 2005.  
<http://www.lcb.state.pa.us/plcb/cwp/view.asp?a=1334&q=555824>

his front and welcomed me. His pants stopped four inches above the top of his shoes and were decorated with a variety of dried condiments to match the shirt. “You must be the new clerk. Let’s get you on a register.” As we walked to the checkout counter, he said, “You’re gonna like this job, but let me tell ya’ it wears on you. Some customers need this shit, and it’s not pretty.”

When the door opened, the reindeer bells hanging from the handle alerted me to my first customer. It was a woman in her fifties. “Where’s Happy. Is he here? Listen, if you ever have sex in a bathtub of Jello use the green. The red stains real bad...Pint of Jacquin’s.” I reached behind me and found the cool glass flask. Its contents were clear, at least it wouldn’t stain.

I met my other manager the next day. His name was Bill. He was 54. He lived with his mother, and had dated the same woman for the last eighteen years—he dated two for the last six. Every other Monday he went to New York to watch a Broadway musical. Which girl he took, I never asked.

We were open nine to nine, Monday through Saturday. People would peek through the shades at 8:45 AM and bang on the glass at 9:05 PM. Ron would just look at them and laugh. “It’s like the Ho Chi Min trail, they just keep coming.” Ron had me ring him a bottle of Haller’s Whisky once a week. He had between 300 and 400 model trains in his apartment and three tracks weaving in and out of every room. Sometimes I would picture him sitting among his trains and getting shit-faced. Then I would laugh.

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After a month, I was very good at my job. I could guess what people would buy, vodka, rum, bottled wine, or its bastard offspring, boxed. It often wasn’t skill—I had just served them before. In “Groundhog Day” Bill Murray says, “Maybe the real God’s not omnipotent. Maybe

he's just been around so long he knows everything." By the end of the summer, I became god of the drink.

Even underage I know more about alcohol than nearly anyone who is allowed to drink it. There are over 50 brands of rum, hundreds of brands of vodka, and hundreds of thousands of wines. Half of our business, however, was only four products: Jacquin's Vodka, Bacardi Light, Captain Morgan's, and Franzia boxed wine. I never heard of boxed wine until that summer. It has an expiration date.

Alcohol is synthetic conscience. It readjusts right and wrong. Until a certain point, it's fun and harmless. In mid-July, I heard reindeer bells. "Hey, I need ten boxed wines. It's not all for me. It's a drinking contest I started, the Tour de Franzia." He was going for his seventh title, the same as Lance.

However, as the months passed, I got to know the people for whom it was no longer fun and harmless. John lived in the house next to the store. He was the first customer that I identified as an alcoholic. He would stretch out in his front yard on a beach towel of a naked brunette. As the summer passed, his Anglo-skin sizzled till it resembled Virginia ham; he was our shop's wooden Indian. From his post he would heckle women to buy him a pint. He was the first to scare me. I have an addictive personality, and I don't want to die.

In early August, two men came in. One was a regular, the other his friend. When they got to the register they didn't have any money and Ron told them they were holding up the line and he would have to void their sale. "Hold on, hold on, I got the money." "I'm sorry sir. You'll have to come back when you have it in your hand." "What the fuck is wrong with you fat man. Ever since we came in here you been givin' us attitude. I ought to whoop your motherfuckin'

ass. All I want is some booze.” They returned ten minutes later with the money. They left and Ron laughed, “It’s the fuckin’ Ho Chi Min Trail.”

The comedian Mitch Hedberg said, “Alcoholism is a disease. But it’s the only disease you can get yelled at for having.” During my last week, before I could hear the reindeer bells I heard, “They know you in here mom. You’re worse than my boyfriend. You’re an alcoholic.” “Shut your mouth. I’m not an alcoholic. I’m a fucking drunk. There’s a difference...Alcoholics go to meetings.” It was Jello-lady. She came in everyday. I would have the pint next to my register waiting. Some days she looked healthy, other days she would shake. Some days she paid in exact change, four one dollar bills and thirty-three cents, other days she would spill out what looked like the contents of a piggy bank, say “It’s all there,” and leave. It was disturbing to see a person disintegrate, to see them become an urge.

I had an image of who an alcoholic was. An alcoholic was a man. He was forty-two, unemployed, and his name was Jim or John. He was belligerent when drunk and uncomfortable-looking when not. There are fourteen million alcoholics in this country, roughly one in thirteen adults.<sup>2</sup> They can’t all be Jims and Johns. An alcoholic may be a wino or a welfare mother, but they have also been writers, presidents, and pastors. They just have the taste in their mouths.

On my last day, the reindeer bells brought in Leanne. “Hey Honey. How ya doing today.” She’d buy two bottles of Great Western Champagne. She came in everyday to buy two bottles. “I know you saw me in here yesterday, but I won’t be in tomorrow. I know. I’ve been so bad.” Leanne had tried to stop drinking, but like 90% of all recovering alcoholics<sup>3</sup> she relapsed. Twelve steps is more work than three: twist, pour, and drink. Leanne may be the only alcoholic in the world who drinks exclusively champagne. I’m proud that she came into my

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<sup>2</sup> “What is Alcoholism,” NIAAA. 11 October 2005. <http://www.aarecovery.com/alcoholism.html>

<sup>3</sup> “Relapse and Craving,” NIAAA. October 2000. <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa06.htm>

store. I feel like she should be in The Guinness Book. I hate that I feel that way. We were dealing with peoples' lives. All three of us in that store went to church every Sunday. Ron was in the choir and Bill taught Sunday school. Yet we ignored the truth—we were killers, Kervorkian's. The regulars, Jello, Leanne, Cathy, Homeless George, and John, are helium balloons slowly leaking air. Three, five, ten years from now they will be bags of rubber, shriveled and empty.