Brown Jug

Dylan Cooley*
The state of Alaska, for whatever reason, has an unusually high rate of alcoholism. People are quick to cite the long and dark winters as the cause, as if the only solution to cold weather and boredom is drunkenness, but the exact reasons behind the struggle are likely much more complicated and hard to pin down. Regardless of its cause, the issue brings with it a concentration of other social problems that make the state an outlier. Homelessness, sexually transmitted diseases, and domestic violence all exist far beyond their fair share in the forty-ninth state.

While some of these issues are more prevalent in the smaller villages of rural Alaska, there is a neighborhood in Anchorage called Mountain View, where poverty and social decay abound. Route 45 of the People Mover, the local bus system, cuts through the neighborhood after leaving downtown. At the other end of the line is the free medical clinic, and in between are a handful of liquor stores, the homeless shelter, and the place I called home for a year.

For a few months when I was twenty-two I worked at a liquor store in Mountain View. Squeezed into a strip mall between a bingo parlor and the Red Apple grocery store, was the Brown Jug. The building was a rotten spot in a rotten neighborhood, but it was the only place around where you could get booze and food, so it thrived. It managed to retain, however, its inherently shitty aura, becoming collectively known to us as the Brown Apple.

The Brown Jug was a Canadian-owned chain that capitalized on the woes of the Last Frontier. They made claims of social responsibility, and in fact refused to sell to intoxicated individuals, but that was the law in Alaska and was really just an effort to protect their liability. In reality, they knew their markets well. The midtown location had a wine section bigger than the entire Mt. View store, while we sold only cheap malt liquor and plastic bottles of vodka and whiskey.

The training process for employees of the Mt. View Brown Jug was unlike that for any other retail job. There was no concern for customer service or up-selling, and the patrons were generally made out to be enemies.

"You have to profile people," my manager told me after I had worked there for two weeks. "When those guys come in with their hoods up, acting like they're shopping around, they're here to steal." She explicitly encouraged racial profiling, though it was never clear as to which race was supposed to be suspect; I just knew it wasn't white people. The manager and I were two of a very small number of white people who lived in Mt. View, so I was under the impression I was supposed to profile every single person who walked through the door. I had a hard time assuming everyone was evil, which I suppose is why she was consistently reminding me that everyone was.

The job, according to my manager, was to simply minimize theft and protect the liability of the company by not selling to people who weren't allowed to drink. In Alaska, that doesn't necessarily mean people under twenty-one.

At some point in the state's short history, legislators realized that alcohol abuse was a serious problem and introduced the infamous red stripe. If you are arrested more than once for alcohol-related incidents, you get a brand new ID with a bright red stripe on it. Written on the stripe are the ambiguous words, "Alcohol Restricted." Carriers of these IDs are not allowed to possess alcohol, be intoxicated, or even enter an establishment that sells or serves alcohol. Thus, the job of every liquor store
employee, bartender, and server, includes checking the ID of every single person who wants to buy a drink, regardless of apparent age. Needless to say, some older residents of Mt. View were not excited about a young cheechako asking them for identification.

Beyond checking IDs and turning away the snow- and puke-covered individuals who'd obviously just managed to crawl out of another snow bank, we were on the lookout for anyone on the long list of eighty-sixes. Every Brown Jug location had a bulletin board or a binder or some other way to compile the information they had gathered on those who weren't allowed in the store due to theft or altercations within the store. At some point, between selling alcohol and fighting off the hordes of people trying to steal it, we were supposed to sift through the Polaroids from the nineties and blurry camera stills in an attempt to memorize the hundreds of faces. When I finally got the chance to survey our binder, I recognized more than a few of my nightly customers.

Among those regulars who bravely ignored the ban placed on them was a guy named Sammy. I counted four pictures of Sammy in our binder, spread out over fifteen years, yet he was there almost every night. The photos showed the physical toll that alcoholism takes on a body—a unique form of deterioration that I got a brief glimpse of during my short time at the Brown Jug. Even from the Polaroids I could see that Sammy, like so many others around there, wasn't quite what he used to be. In the earlier photos his face looked fit, free of scars, and his eyes seemed to have a certain awareness about them. The Sammy I saw each night looked worn down, his eyes puffy and his teeth decaying. Sammy's case was by no means an anomaly, and I had the sad realization that the more tattered and weary clientele of the Brown Jug were once young and healthy, and that before long the younger and healthier people I saw each night would take their place.

Since Sammy was such a regular, it wasn't long after I'd identified him in the binder that he stopped in. It was a busy Friday night, and he walked all the way through the store, picked his poisons, and reached the line before I could summon the guts to say something to him.

“You know you can't be in here, man,” I said to him. He looked both offended and heartbroken, so I started to feel a little guilty. In reality though, it was probably the fact that there were eight or ten other people watching that made me feel the need to explain. “You've been eighty-sixed several times, Sammy.”

Using his first name had the desired effect, as Sammy could make no claims about a case of mistaken identity. He sulked to the nearest shelf to set down whatever he had planned on buying, and I realized that not only was he embarrassed, but I was too. The store was silent, likely for the first time in history, and my explanation had done little in the way of making me feel like I'd done the right thing. I felt like an asshole. Sammy left willingly, and as I got back to work I avoided the eyes of the surprised onlookers and thought to myself that I would never again kick somebody out if I didn't have to. Sammy was probably not a terrible guy, and really he was just looking to catch a buzz, so who was I to get in his way? But then a guy in the line started talking at me excitedly and making gestures toward the door. He didn't speak English, so it took me a minute, but eventually I figured out that Sammy had just stolen a bottle. So I guess, in the end, fuck Sammy, and I'd send him packing every time.

In addition to refusing sales to banned or intoxicated individuals, Brown Jug also had the policy of allowing customers only two visits per day. Most knew this and had figured out that the shift change was at five o'clock. The rest, when I reminded them they had already been in several times that day, used my name and acted as if I was robbing them of their livelihood.
“Come on, Dylan,” they would say, reading my nametag. “How you gonna do me like that? I thought we were cool, man.”

The obvious answer to this dilemma would be to buy the evening’s supply of booze in one visit, but I suppose for some there was always the need for more.

Since I lived in Mt. View, my interactions with the patrons of the Brown Jug were not necessarily limited to my nights at work. I didn’t have a car at the time, so I rode the bus when I went downtown and I bought my groceries at the Red Apple. On a daily basis I would encounter the people who used my first name and acted like friends when buying or attempting to buy alcohol from me. They would ask me for change outside the Red Apple or brush past me to get off the 45 at the shelter. Not once did anyone ever appear to recognize me as a guy they were cool with.

Occasionally, usually later in the night, there was a need to call the Anchorage Safety Patrol. Despite sounding like a band of middle school kids in reflective vests, ASP had a very serious job. Officially the ASP van apprehended people who were deemed so incapacitated by alcohol that they posed a threat to either themselves or the public, and it took them to the mythical “sleep-off.” In reality, the ASP scooped up people who were passed out in public places, and took them either to the hospital if they needed it, or to the portion of the Anchorage jail where they could sleep off the alcohol without freezing to death.

There was generally a public outcry when someone froze to death in the city. It had become rare by the time I moved to Anchorage, due mostly to things like the ASP and the sleep-off, but it did happen once that year. Citizens wanted to know why their city couldn’t appropriately handle the homeless situation and demanded action to prevent it from happening again. It didn’t last long, though, and a piece of legislation or a new pebble mine eventually threatened to change the way Alaskans fish and hunt, and their normal sense of priorities was restored.

Eventually, fed up with handling piss-soaked dollar bills and counting handfuls of change dumped onto the counter by shaky hands, I left the Mt. View Brown Jug. In reality my departure was not a moral protest or a noble effort to escape the role of the enabler, but the simple result of my life no longer requiring me to work such a shitty job. I had registered for classes at the University of Alaska, and I wasn’t going to let the Brown Apple distract me from my future. I did, however, take comfort in the fact that I would no longer play a direct role in the decline of Alaskan society.

Excited about leaving, I told some of my more talkative customers that I was quitting to focus on school. On my last day some of the guys who saw us as “cool” told me we should get together for a drink sometime. They were all amazed and proud at my pursuit of education, and in our thirty-second-long conversations they said things like, “see you around, kid,” and, ironically, “take care of yourself.” I continued to see them throughout the spring, they continued to ask for spare dollars, and more than ever I went apparently unrecognized.

Toward the end of my last night of work I had one final moment of excitement. Two men came into the store, separately, and I recognized them both, but not necessarily for bad reasons. The first guy was on his phone looking for a specific kind of champagne, so I showed him where it was and started back toward the counter.

“It’s too expensive here,” I heard him say into the phone as I walked away, “I’ll get it somewhere else.”

Before I got back to the counter the second guy whistled
for my attention and started pointing at the first guy, making a motion like he was tucking something into his coat. Going past the counter, I got in front of guy number one and asked for his ID. He tried to step around me of course, acting like he was too busy with his phone conversation to even notice me, but I saw the top of the bottle in his coat. When I grabbed the bottle, he did too, pushing me backwards through the door and into the harsh February night. After a second of tug of war over the bottle, I realized that a third set of hands had come into the mix, and then I noticed Sammy’s swollen eyes looking into mine. He had been waiting right outside the door, but he was obviously surprised to see me tumble out with his accomplice.

When I grabbed Sammy by the front of his coat and used his name his friend was ready to give up the bottle. He let go, apparently ready to get out of there quickly, probably to try for another bottle at another store.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said to Sammy.

“Get your hands off me,” Sammy said to me.

“Fuck you, Sammy,” I said. “Let go of the bottle and get the fuck out of here.”

Although I got the bottle back, I was angry that people made me go through things like that. I had to be both mean and scared, all for 750 ml of cheap champagne. I was attempting to feel nostalgic, trying to convince myself that I would miss the clientele of the Brown Jug, but at that moment I really just hated every one of them. I stayed mad for the rest of the night, and when I closed up I didn’t mop the floors, stock the coolers, or inventory the bottles. I refused to be friendly with the people who walked in the door, and I wouldn’t work for the people who immediately assumed they were thieves—I couldn’t find a reason to take either side in the meaningless struggle.

A few days ago, while wandering around on the internet, I came across an interesting piece of photojournalism. A photographer had spent a weekend with the Anchorage Safety Patrol, taking faceless photos of the service’s users and recording the amazingly high numbers they registered on the breathalyzer. The photos showed Safety Patrollers performing their various tasks: talking with the callers while the “customer” lies unconscious in the grass or on the sidewalk; stepping over empty bottles and used syringes to rescue inebriates from tent communities in the woods; loading urine-soaked, seemingly lifeless bodies into the back of the van. In the backdrop is my old neighborhood: the Brown Apple, the shelter, and bus stop where I waited for the 45 to take me to campus.

Alongside the photos there were statistics breaking down the sleep-off’s client base by race, age, gender, and frequency of use. The data shows little more than the photos; the mere existence of the ASP proves there is a continuing problem in Mt. View and throughout Anchorage. That night in February, Sammy and his friend probably got a bottle of something from the liquor store around the corner, and they’re probably still at it today; Brown Jug employees are probably still profiling customers and adding photos to the binder; someone will probably die of exposure in the near future.

Having left Alaska, I see now that I never really fit in; I was never actually one of them. I always had a way out of that place and that life, a lifeline that could keep me from falling into the same habits as Sammy and his friends. College was always an option for me, and my worst-case scenario was moving back to the Midwest, where addicts and their substances wouldn’t be breathing down my neck. Unlike most of the neighborhood’s residents, Mt. View was just a temporary home that I chose. My customers might have recognized me outside of work as
I sat next to them on the bus, but I had nothing to offer them when I wasn't selling alcohol, so they had no need to talk to me. I couldn't understand what those people put themselves through or the perpetual search for more alcohol because it was a new and foreign thing to me. In my refusal to profile I ended up only making judgments about their lives and what I thought were the choices they had made. To them, the people of Mt. View, the lives they have lived must seem both inevitable and necessary.

**Dylan Cooley** graduated from Iowa State in May of 2015, then suddenly disappeared from the Ames area. Rumor has it that he has since been seen lurking around the University of Iowa’s Nonfiction Writing Program in Iowa City. A source says he is biding his time there until he can convince his wife and son to move to Iceland.