



Coors Brewery on the left, Castle Rock and South Table Mountain on the right.

Chapter 17

Crossing the Line

Spring, 1965

Boys, everyone rebels against authority at some point. I imagine you will. We sneaked out of the house, smoked cigarettes, and drank beers before we were of age. Usually, these small rebellions were harmless and the consequences were minor. If our parents caught us, we were grounded for days, or even weeks. But one time, it was much more serious. Here's what happened.

I was sixteen, and a sophomore in high school. My accomplices that night included Dude, Mike, and Norm. Dude's sister Tana was eighteen and a senior, and that meant she could buy 3.2 percent beer legally. Our country was beginning a war fighting Communism in Vietnam, and eighteen-year-old boys were being drafted to fight. Our state legislature felt that someone old enough to carry a rifle in Vietnam should be able to drink a beer before he was shipped off to stop Communist aggression. However, they were concerned about teenage drinking, so they limited the beer sold to those from 18 to 21 to a maximum of 3.2 percent alcohol compared to regular beer, which contained 5 or 6 percent. Of course someone could get just as drunk on 3.2; it just required consuming more.

Tana readily agreed to contribute to our delinquency with the stipulation that we provide enough money for her to buy a six-pack for her and her friends. We dug into our pockets and produced enough loose bills and change for two six-packs, one for her and one for us.

At the center of our town and our local economy sat an enormous brewery. It was reportedly the largest single brewery in the country. Everyone in town was linked financially to beer in some way. Most of my aunts, uncles, and cousins worked in the brewery. If no one in your family worked there, your family had friends who did. Beer accompanied our way of life. It was always in the refrigerator and was the beverage of choice at every family gathering — birthdays, weddings, and post-funeral get-togethers. My parents would have let me have a beer at home if I wanted, but I rarely did. There was no thrill in drinking by myself.

Athletes were forbidden to drink by the high-school administration, even the of-drinking-age eighteen-year-olds. The penalty for getting caught was severe — banishment from athletics for a year. There was no warning rule. First offense resulted in a year-long suspension. Smaller penalties for a first offense were not even considered. Somehow, no one seemed to think this penalty was inconsistent with the town's

culture. Every year a few athletes drank, were caught, and were suspended. Lessons needed to be learned. Examples had to be set.

We weren't about to go on a drunken binge that warm spring night; we had six beers for the four of us, and one and a half 3.2 beers each doesn't qualify as a binge. For some reason, the four of us, all athletes and fully aware of the rules, were willing to risk a year-long suspension to have a cold one. Was it the thrill of challenging authority and getting away with it that compelled us? More likely, we were just teenage boys looking for excitement. And we thought we were too smart to get caught.

We met Tana a block from the 7-11 where she had bought the beer. As she approached my '57 Ford, I nervously checked out every person walking down the sidewalk and every car that cruised past. She walked to the driver's window, pulled the six-pack from the grocery bag, and handed it to me.

"Get that out of sight!" Dude hissed as I urgently shoved the beer under the seat. "Jesus, Tana! What are you doing?" he added, craning his neck in every direction to see if anyone saw the exchange. Mike and Norm just laughed. They were experienced drinkers. Dude and I were first-timers.

"Relax, man," Mike told Dude. "There's no one looking."

Norm added, "Let's get this show on the road. I'm thirsty."

Second thoughts filled my head as I pulled slowly from the curb and turned left on Ford Street. I knew I would never live it down if I chickened out now. I had crossed a line; there was no turning back.

I headed north on Ford Street being extra careful to stay below the speed limit. We knew Officer Hal, one of the local cops, would be sitting in his patrol car out of sight and waiting for speeders. The last thing I wanted was to be pulled over for speeding with beer in the car. About ten blocks later, we spied Officer Hal's cruiser tucked behind a pickup in the parking lane. I slowed and looked in his direction. Officer Hal caught my eye as I rolled past, glass-packs rumbling. I looked into the rear-view mirror and saw the Ford police cruiser right behind me. My three companions were well aware of Hal's tail.

"Just stay cool," Mike advised. "Hal hates glass-packs." (Boys, glass-packs were modified mufflers we added to our cars to make them louder.)

Sweat beaded on my forehead. My heart was pounding. I drove slowly to keep my Ford to a low rumble. I obeyed every traffic law and signaled every turn well in

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advance. Continuing north, we soon came to Golden Gate Canyon and the city limits sign. I turned west onto the dirt road that headed into the foothills and out of town. Officer Hal continued north. I took a deep breath. We were safely out of his jurisdiction.

It was getting dark as I drove slowly up the twisting canyon road. A dust plume rose from the back of the car. We passed a side road leading to Crazy Ned's ranch with the hand-painted sign featuring a skull and crossbones and warning trespassers that they would be shot on sight.

"Let's keep moving. We don't want to be anywhere near Crazy Ned," Norm suggested. Everyone agreed.

A few miles later, with darkness all around, I rounded a bend and came to a wide spot in the road. I pulled in and turned the car around facing back toward town. A high ridge neatly hid us from oncoming traffic while simultaneously blocking our view of anyone coming up the road. I was not concerned; hardly anyone used this road at night.

When the dust settled, we rolled down the windows, and the sweet smell of spring filled the car. We sat there talking about nothing in particular for a while. We wanted to be sure the coast was clear.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, Dude stated the obvious, "It's time for a beer!"

I fished the six-pack from under the seat, pulled a cold can from the cardboard package, punched a hole in the top with a can opener, and took a big drink. I passed the can to Dude, who did the same. He in turn gave it to Mike and then Norm. Just as I was about to hand a beer to everyone, I looked up to see the glow of headlights coming in our direction from the other side of the ridge.

"Shit! Who's that?" I yelled.

"It's got to be Hal!" Dude yelled in reply, forgetting all about police jurisdictions.

Panicking, I opened the door, took the six-pack with its five remaining cans, and placed it under the car. Norm threw the empty into the trees. I started the engine, turned on the lights and, not wanting to be seen stopped suspiciously on the side of the road, started rolling slowly forward. The lights of the oncoming vehicle drew closer, and we could hear the roar of the engine. A second later, Crazy Ned's ancient pickup raced into view. He slid around the bend, passed us, and continued up the canyon, not pausing for a second. I don't think he even saw us.

Just as the old truck moved out of view, we heard a popping sound followed by hissing coming from under the car. Fearing a broken brake line, I jumped out to see what had happened. The smell of beer and mud wafted from beneath the car. The squashed six-pack lay crumpled under the rear wheel. I had managed to run over the remaining five beers.

“You idiot!” Dude, Mike, and Norm screamed in near-perfect harmony. After a few more choice comments about my character, my family, and even my dog, Mike and Norm fell silent. They sat in the backseat looking despondent. Dude stared through the windshield. I was secretly relieved.

I started the car and headed back to town. We left the six-pack in the road where it had died. Dude passed a pack of Wrigley’s Spearmint gum around and we all chewed loudly, hoping to eliminate the odor of the 3 ounces of beer we had each consumed.

Back in town, we cruised down Jackson to where Officer Hal had set up shop behind a large shrub. We waved as we passed and turned into the Methodist church, where a dance was just getting underway. As we walked into the dance, we ran into Tana, who wanted to know all about our evening. “Don’t even ask,” Dude commanded, looking accusingly in my direction.

Four days later, first Mike and then Norm were pulled into the athletic director’s office and were questioned about drinking. The word spread quickly through the school, and anyone who had ever shared a beer with Mike and Norm began to sweat. They withstood the interrogation for hours before finally confessing. But they refused to give up their accomplices. Mike and Norm were wrestlers. They had learned to endure pain during long hours of punishing practice in the high school wrestling room. Nothing the athletic director threw at them could break their code of silence. They stood tough and in due course were suspended from athletics for a year. Shamed by the administration, they were hailed by their friends and cohorts. The majority of students held them in the highest regard for not caving.

Sometime after their sentences were handed out, I found Mike and Norm at the 7-11 drinking cokes and eating hotdogs. When I asked why they didn’t give Dude and me up, they told me it wouldn’t have made any difference in their suspensions. They were going down regardless of whom they gave up.

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“And three ounces of beer isn't worth a year,” Mike added.

I gave up beer from that moment until I was 18 and finished with school athletics. Dude did the same, as did most everyone in our class. A cold beer was not worth the heat.