



## drinking problem



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*Wentworth said that “*Drinking Problem*” concerns a man who runs afoul of a new technology intended to cut down on the need to recycle. But, as with many innovations, the technology has unintended consequences.*



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k.d. wentworth

**J**oe settled into his accustomed seat before the Brass Tack's polished black granite bar. It had been a tough day, full of stupid meetings. But, hey, lots of days were tough. Nothing new there. The jukebox was grinding out something unmelodic and off to one side, a frizzy-headed woman regarded the beer bottle in the middle of her table with dread

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as though it was about to explode. Outside, the July sun was blazing, even at 5:30 a force with which to be reckoned.

“Cold one?” Tom Whitebear, the barkeep asked. He was tall, black-haired, and laconic with the presence of a deep dark well, absorbing his patrons’ words and giving back blessed silence.

Joe nodded, liking that he didn’t even have to ask. His tongue was already full of holes from biting it all day long. If Salinger emailed him one more time demanding reports that weren’t even due yet, by God, he would take a stapler to the idiot’s balding head.

Tom slid a bottle with a strange blue and gold label in front of him and stared at it morosely.

“I drink *Miller*,” Joe said, too weary to raise his voice.

“This *is* Miller,” Tom said, sliding a slip of paper across the gleaming blackness. “The packaging’s just different. They call it a ‘Smart Bottle.’ Even comes with its own instructions.”

“Instructions for a freaking bottle of beer?” Joe blinked.

Tom seized a cloth and buffed the bar as though it was smeared—which it wasn’t. “You been in Tibet or something? Press has been screaming about this for weeks. It’s the law, went into effect today. Brew’s only available in these fancy ‘Smart’ bottles now. Supposed to save the environment. Big Brother watching out for us and all that.”

“I don’t get it.” Joe flicked the back of his finger against the cold glass, making it ring. The label featured a man holding up a bottle and smiling broadly.

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“Whole damn country, no, make that the whole damned world, is going to hell.” Tom peeled off a tab below the label that ran all around the bottle and pushed it gingerly toward him with his fingertips. “Joe Browder, meet your Smart Bottle,” he said in an oddly formal way, as though he were introducing Joe to a potential partner at a stupid speed-dating party.

Joe noticed belatedly that the barkeep was pulling off latex gloves. “What the hell?”

“Hope the two of you will be very happy,” Tom muttered and slouched off to wait on a man at the far end of the bar.

Joe picked the bottle up, finding the label’s texture oddly rough. His hand tingled and he set the bottle aside to examine his palm. The skin was slightly reddened as though he’d scraped it against something.

“Greetings!” a hollow little voice said. “I am your Symesco A2300 Smart Bottle equipped with DNA recognition software and a high environmental consciousness quotient. I will be handling all your future beer consumption needs.”

Joe pushed back off the stool, his heart thumping. “Did that thing just talk?”

“Drink me, Joe,” the bottle said, “while I’m nice and frosty. Delay will not improve the esthetics of the experience.”

Hairs crawled on the back of his neck. “Like hell I will!”

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“Might as well,” Tom said as he came back. “Once you touch the sensor, infernal thing is imprinted on you. It’s yours—permanently.”

Fuming, Joe threw a five on the bar and stood.

“Actually, it costs twenty-five bucks.” Tom pushed it toward him. “One-time deposit. And you take it with you so I can refill it the next time you come in.”

Joe pulled a twenty out of his billfold and added it to the five, glaring at the offending bottle with its ridiculous blue and gold label. “Not in this lifetime, buddy!” He turned to go.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Tom said to his back. “Damn thing has a proximity sensor.”

Joe was halfway to the door when the racket began, sort of like a tornado siren augmented by the agonies of a dying cat. The closer he got to the door, the louder it became. The other patrons were holding their hands over their ears and appeared to be shouting at him, but he couldn’t hear them. Tom seized the bottle and followed him to the door. “You got to take it with you,” he said, “or it won’t let up!”

Joe snatched the bottle and the moment he touched it, the clamor cut off. At a side table, a man and woman, both in their twenties, shook their heads. “Dumb-ass,” the man, who looked like one of those fresh-faced business school grads, said. “Didn’t read the instructions, did you?”

Joe had a half a mind to break the bottle over the sod’s head. Tom retrieved the abandoned operating sheet and

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pushed it into Joe's other hand. "You need to familiarize yourself with the bad news," he said in a low voice. "I'm afraid things are going to be very different around here."

Joe stuffed the paper into his pocket and stalked out.

JOE Poured out the bottle on the sidewalk and drove his Mazda home to his apartment. Terri was waiting with lasagna in the oven. She worked as a third grade teacher so she arrived home first. Unfortunately, she always wanted to natter at him about how exhausting *her* day had been the second he got home, so that he never had a quiet moment to put his thoughts in order.

"What's that?" she said as he closed the door.

"Something called a 'Smart Bottle,'" he said, setting it down with a thump on the breakfast bar. He dropped his briefcase onto the coffee table and wrenched at his tie. "The bartender tricked me into buying it at the Brass Tack."

"My class read about these," she said, picking it up and turning it under the light to examine the label. "They're supposed to cut down on the need to recycle."

"Actually, Symesco Smart Bottles cannot be recycled," the hollow little voice said. "We are engineered with DNA recognition software to provide years of imbibing pleasure."

Joe sank onto the couch. "I can't get the stupid thing to shut up."

"Why do you have DNA recognition capabilities?" Terri said.

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“I am Joe’s bottle,” it said. “If I could not recognize him, I might be employed by any number of unauthorized users. That would be unhygienic.”

“Correction,” Joe said, taking the bottle out of Terri’s hand. “You *were* my bottle. Now you’re just so much scrap glass.” He opened the pantry and tossed the bottle with a clank into the recycling bin.

The racket began again, this time much worse in the confined space of the apartment. Cursing, he pulled the bottle out. “Stop that!” The wail cut off.

Terri glared. “Did you pay good money for that thing?”

“Washington evidently passed some sort of stupid law when no one was paying attention,” he muttered, then dug in his pocket for the wadded instructions. “But there must be a way to turn it off, otherwise, you’d have to take it to work with you and even in the shower.”

“Congratulations on your purchase of a Symesco A2300 Smart Bottle,” the instructions read, “The first monumental step toward maintaining a waste-free environment!”

He skimmed down through more bombastic, self-aggrandizing rhetoric, which included the instructions for removing the tab over the sensor and introducing the “client” to the bottle, until he reached “Temporary Deactivation.”

“You can command your bottle to ‘sleep’ when not in use for twenty-four hours at a time,” the instructions read.

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“with one two-week deactivation permitted every four months when the client wishes to vacation without his Smart Bottle, though this is not recommended. It can be reactivated at any time by simply touching the DNA-sensitive label. Deactivation for longer or more frequent periods will require a waiver from Symesco. Those wishing to apply for the necessary code phrases should call the Symesco Help Line at 1-800-SMT-BOTL or consult our convenient website: [www.symesco.com](http://www.symesco.com).”

Joe held the brown bottle up. “Sleep, dammit!”

It didn’t seem any different, but this time, when he tossed it into the recycling bin, it didn’t protest.

Terri took the instructions and sat reading them until dinner was ready. They both ate in blessed silence.

WHEN HE SHOWED up at the Brass Tack the next day after work, Tom gave him a leery look. “Dude, where’s your bottle?”

“In the recycling bin, where the damn thing belongs.” Joe slid onto a stool and turned his palms down on the blessedly cool surface. “Bring me a cold one.”

Tom folded his white bar cloth. “Can’t.”

“Are you trying to be funny?” Joe asked. “Because it’s been a long frustrating day and I am in no way in the mood.”

“It’s against the law to serve registered Symesco users without their bottles,” the barkeep said morosely. “You’re at least the twentieth person I’ve had to tell that to since

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noon. Can't nobody read instructions, I guess." He polished a bit of imaginary grime.

"And you registered me yesterday," Joe said. "Gee, thanks."

"It's the—"

"—law," Joe finished for him. "Okay, then sell me another stupid Smart Bottle." Though the thought of being responsible for two of the infernal devices was sobering, not the sensation he was seeking at the moment.

Tom shook his head. "One to a customer. It's the—"

Joe shoved away from the bar, knocking the stool over. "Guess I'll just take my business elsewhere!"

"Won't do no good," Tom said, studying his cleaning cloth. "No bar will serve you without checking identification, and you're in the system now as a Symesco user." He raised his head and met Joe's eyes. "Just go home and get your bottle and I'll refill the blasted thing until your eyes float."

But he didn't have time for that. Terri would have dinner on the table in thirty minutes and she would complain all night if he was late. "Forget it!" he said and plunged back outside into the glaring afternoon sun.

He stopped by the Pay-N-Git convenience store on the way home to pick up a six pack. The cooler was almost empty and he had to settle for an off-brand he'd never heard of, Bjorn's Mountain Gold. Probably tasted like yeast water.

The bored clerk, a narrow-eyed girl chomping on a wad of gum, gave him a stern look from behind the high counter. "ID?"

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At thirty-seven, he hadn't been IDed for at least ten years, maybe more. He blinked. "You've got to be kidding."

"No, sir." She popped her gum and then jerked her chin to indicate the line of impatient customers behind him. "We never kid. It's like totally against company policy."

Sighing, he dug in his wallet and produced his driver's license. She punched in his number on a keypad, shook her head, and shoved the plastic rectangle back at him. "Sorry, pops, you're a registered Symesco user. I can't sell alternate containers to you." She gave him a hard-eyed look. "Even old geezers have to follow the rules, you know. If you have your bottle, we can refill it, but that's all."

Fuming, he relinquished the six pack and left.

End of Excerpt