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# Another Round for Jake

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BY NORMAN ARRINGTON

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"**J**ake, leave the gentleman alone," the bartender said, not unkindly. "Old Jake loves to talk, don't you pay him no mind," he said to me.

The old man was the only other person in the bar. He shoved a chair out from his table with his worn boot.

"Park it here, stranger," he said. His voice sounded like gravel rolling down a rusty tin roof.

"It's okay," I said to the bartender. I carried my beer over to his table and sat down.

I had been driving alone for the past three days and talking to someone other than the car radio seemed like a good idea. I'd stopped at the little redneck bar in a nowhere west Texas town late one hot summer day to get something wet and cold.

As soon as I opened the sagging screen door and walked in, I noticed him sitting alone at a table near the back of the dark, dingy room. He looked to be about eighty years old, scrawny and leather hard. His gnarled hands were cradling a mug of beer and a

roll-your-own cigarette hung from the corner of his lip. The smoke curled into his eyes, making him squint as he looked up and stared at me with watery blue eyes from under the rim of his battered old hat.

"Ain't seen ya in here before. Ya new in town?" he asked.

"No, just passing through," I replied. "I've got business down in El Paso."

"Not many strangers stop in this jerkwater town anymore unless they's up to no good. You a cop or runnin' dope?"

I laughed and said, "No, I'm a sales rep for an advertising company."

"What the hell kind of work is that fer a man?" Jake snorted. "You ever kill a man? Naw, I don't reckon you're the type."

I was taken aback. I took a long pull on my beer and fumbled for my cigarettes. I shook one out and offered it to Jake.

"Thanks, I'll smoke my own," he said with just a trace of wounded pride.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Jake ordered another beer for us both. He did not look up when the beers were brought to our table until I dug out my wallet and paid for them.

Jake looked at me with a toothless grin. Broken blood vessels flamed his cheeks and gray stubble peppered his square jaw and chin. He tipped his bottle back and drank deeply. A trickle of beer coursed down the deep crease at the corner of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"I seen a man killed right here in this bar," Jake said with a far-away look in his eyes. "Musta been forty, forty-five years ago."

"What happened?" I asked, leaning forward to hear him better.

Jake sat back in his chair and gazed at me for a long time, like he was studying me. Then he laughed a hoarse, barking laugh.

"He was sittin' bout where ya are now when it happened. 'Course it weren't murder," Jake said.

The old man had offered me the bait. He took another draw on his beer while he waited to see if I took the hook. I swallowed it deep.

"So, what happened?" I asked, swimming into his net.

"Well now," he began, while signaling for another beer, "we'd all been back from the war, oh, 'bout two, three years when it all started. My baby girl, Sara, was goin' on eleven. Me an' the missus and all three of the kids had come to town one Saturday. We was livin' on the old Wells place and I was doin' a little dry land farmin'."

Jake paused to knock back another swallow of beer. "Anyway, I'd sold a milk cow and we had a bit of spendin' money, so I gave each of the younguns a quarter and let them go off while the ol' lady and me was gettin' in some supplies.

"Now ol' Melvin Parks was in town, all liquored up. Melvin was bad to drink and he was a real mean drunk.

"Anyways, Sara was standin' on the sidewalk, in front of the drugstore, with an ice cream cone in her hand, just as pretty as a picture. Little Sara always was my favorite," Jake said. He lapsed into silence and sat staring at his beer bottle.

A shudder passed through him and he looked up. "Melvin, he was drivin' that beat up ol' Ford pickup of his down the street," Jake continued. "I cain't say fer sure, but it looked like the bastard was looking right at Sara when he ran right up on the sidewalk and ran her down. She was dead time I could get across the street.

"They held Melvin's trial the day after we buried little Sara. He'd hired a big city lawyer from up at Odessa what got him off with just a fine. The sonofabitch didn't spend one night in jail.

"When Melvin and that damn smooth talkin' lawyer walked out of the court house they both was grinnin' all over their faces. Ol' Melvin was waving and braggin' to his drinkin' buddies how he'd got off scott free. All of a sudden a shot was fired from the other side of the square. Melvin fell down screamin' like a coaloiled cat and grabbing his leg. His whole britches leg was soaked in blood. He was bleeding like a stuck hog. Nobody seen who done it.

"The ambulance hauled him away to the hospital. The sheriff said later that his whole kneecap was blowed away. Melvin was laid up in the hospital fer nearly four weeks," Jake said with a malicious twinkle in his rummy eyes.

"The sheriff came out to my place the next day after the shooting. He knowed that Melvin and me wasn't exactly on the best of terms before he ran over Sara and now he thought I had it in for Melvin. He asked me straight out, 'Did ya shoot Parks?' and I said, 'Sheriff, ya know that if I'da done the shooting I wouldna missed. I'da hit that sonofabitch square 'teen the eyes.' Well, the sheriff owned that was probably right and nothin' more came of it.

"The day that Melvin was let out of the hospital, a bunch of his riffraff friends was there to take him home. They was a laughin' and a jokin' around with the nurse that wheeled him out to his pickup in a wheelchair. She helped him stand up on a pair of crutches.

"One of his pals opened the door of his truck and they were gettin' set to load him in when his good leg just exploded out from under him. They hadn't even heard the sound of the shot before Melvin's blood was splattered all over that old truck. They all dove fer cover and left Melvin just layin' on the ground bleedin' and bellerin'. After a while they just loaded him back into the wheelchair and put him back in the hospital.

"This time, he didn't get out for nearly three months," Jake cackled.

He finished off the last of his beer. I ordered another round.

"Thanks," Jake said, "Talkin's thirsty work. Anyways, the sheriff seen fit to pay me another call. He said that he had thought the first time that somebody had been tryin' to kill Melvin and missed, but this time his other knee was shot off. He sez,

'Now Jake, how do ya figure it?' 'Beats the hell out of me. I was here all day, so it sure weren't me what did it. If ya don't believe me just ask the missus,' I says.

"**T**he sheriff said that he didn't reckon it would do any good to talk to my wife. 'Sides, he didn't have much truck with Melvin, him being such a mean-assed drunk, always fightin' and gettin' into trouble and all. He weren't fixin' to dig none too deep. He did tell me that he didn't want to have to make no more trips out to my place.

"When Melvin finally got out of the hospital, the sheriff and two of his deputies were there to give him a police escort home, but nothin' happened.

"In fact, nothin' happened for a couple ah months. Melvin was getting around on his fancy braces and crutches. He had stuck right close to home for a long time, but I guess he got thirsty. He got one of his pals to take him down to this very same bar. He sat in here all afternoon, drinkin' and jawin' with his mangy buddies. He got to feelin' pretty cocky and started shooting his mouth off 'bout how he was gonna get whoever had shot him. He claimed that he had a good idee who it was.

"**B**ut, when it was time to go home he didn't get all the way out the door afore a thirty-aught-six slug ripped through his left elbow.

"The doctor said that he could go home after only two weeks, but Melvin wouldn't leave the hospital. They had to kick him out. After that, he refused to come outta his house. Melvin lived in a run down place on the south edge of town. He kept the shades down and wouldn't let anyone in, not even his friends. The kid that fetched groceries up to his house said that Melvin made him leave the box on the step and leave before he'd open the door.

"He took to keeping a gun with him all the time. One day some kids shot his front window with a BB gun and Melvin blowed a hole clean through his door with a twelve-gauge shotgun. Folks sorta kept away after that.

"Melvin stayed in that house fer two years and never came outside. Folks here about said that he had gone crazy. Even his old drinkin' buddies were afraid to go up to the house.

"Sometime during that time Melvin musta got religion, 'cause one Sunday he showed up at the Baptist church in town. The good people didn't know what to make of him. His hair had turned gray, and he looked like a walking dead man, they said.

"Turned out that were the only time Melvin went to church 'cause someone shot off his right foot as he was shaking hands with the preacher after the services. Melvin kinda went downhill after that," Jake said.

"What finally happened to Melvin?" I asked. I noticed that Jake's beer was empty. I still had half a bottle. I bought him one more, hoping that would finish the story.

"**I**'m not real clear on what happened to Melvin after he got outa the hospital here. I heard that he spent some time in the 'sylum up ta Big Springs, but I don't know fer sure. He weren't seen around here for nigh on to four years. Then one day he shows up. He couldn't walk, even with crutches. He was in a wheel chair. Well sir, those no-account pals of his'n brought him in here to celebrate his homecomin'. Everybody that was here said that he acted real strange, kinda nervous and jumpy. His hands shook when he lifted his beer and he keep looking around like someone was sneaking up on him.

"Course I'm just tellin' ya what they told me 'cause I weren't nowhere around. But after he sit right thar where ya is sittin' fer about twenty minutes, a car drivin' by backfired, real loud like. Melvin whipped out a pistol and screamed, 'Not again!' and shot hisself right between the eyes, stone cold dead," Jake said.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I thought you said before that you saw it happen."

Jake lifted his beer, looked at me over the top of the bottle and smiled, but did not say a word.

I stopped at the bar to order another beer for Jake before I walked outside into the fading west Texas sun. ■