



7-15-1993

## Jake the Snake's Dogs

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### Recommended Citation

Spencer, Mark (1993) "Jake the Snake's Dogs," *Westview*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 4 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol12/iss4/9>

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her, she'd have those sandwiches for lunch. She'd sit there eatin' 'em and smilin' and actin' like heaven itself had set her dinner table. And about an hour later she'd hand me a dollar and say, "Boy, you run down to the People's Drug Store on the corner and get me the biggest bottle of Maalox they got. Go on, now. Aunt Mary's gonna pay for them onions tonight!"

On one occasion I worked up the temerity to question her about why she did what I thought was a pretty stupid thing to do: indulge in somethin' you knew in advance was gonna hurt like hell. I never forgot her answer. She took a long swig straight from the Maalox bottle I had just brought from People's Drug, hugged me up against that big old calico-covered bosom and looked off into the corner of the room with a kind of faraway look and a tiny little smile on her face that made me feel she was seein' some place I'd never been.

"When you love somethin', boy," she said, "you don't let the fear of pain stand between you and having it."

So twenty-five years later I'm sittin' at the He Ain't Here, lookin' at the cutest, curviest, warmest, juiciest, sweetest onion sandwich you ever saw and thinkin' about the one hand and the other hand and Room 844 and Aunt Mary and the price of things that make life worth livin'.

Camille leaned across the little table and took my beard in her two hands. She pulled my mouth against hers, gently at first, givin' me the opportunity to stop her gracefully, but when I didn't, she kissed me harder and with her mouth open and with her tongue doing things that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

When she stopped, I took a long breath and let it out real slow. "Well, that decides it," I whispered, mostly to myself, but lookin' straight into Camille's eyes. "Kiss me again. And order another round of Maalox."

"Round of what?" she whispered back, opening her mouth and leaning forward.

"Michelob," I corrected, still quick on the uptake. "Another round of Michelob." ■

# Jake the Snake's Dogs

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BY MARK SPENCER

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Texas, 1962

Jesus H. Christ. That's who Samson thinks he sees for a moment as he barrels down the highway at four-fifteen in the morning after the worst fight he's ever had with Candy. No woman has ever really loved him. His Cadillac's high beams catch a thin, bearded, hollow-eyed figure in baggy clothes holding up a hand, beckoning. But it's just a hitch hiker, a bum.

Even if he were in a better mood, Samson wouldn't stop for him. Stink up the car. Talk about how he once met some president or used to be a millionaire.

Samson is on the road a lot because he's a professional wrestler. He used to pick up hitch hikers, but he learned his lesson. They're almost always bums who will talk your ear off with crazy crap. Met President Roosevelt. Was good friends with Gary Cooper in high school. Killed seventy Japs single-handed in one day on an island in the Pacific and escaped just before a volcano erupted and the island sank into the ocean. Screwed Doris Day in high school. Screwed Betty Grable in high school. Screwed Debbie Reynolds in high school. Screwed Rosemary Clooney in high school. Rosemary Clooney—Lord, who would want to? But Samson once picked up a guy who claimed he did. One old bum claimed that he was Ty Cobb, the baseball player, and that he had a million dollars in the paper bag he held on his lap; he also said he had a German Luger in the bag and wasn't afraid to use it if some bastard got ideas about his money.

Samson barrels along at eighty, ninety, ninety-five. When he stormed out of Candy's house a couple of hours ago—her having shouted "Larry!" in the heat of passion—he left Dallas in the direction of Donie with the idea of going to his mama's house for breakfast and then on to Houston for his Texas Cage Death Match tomorrow night, but after a few miles, he saw a sign for the road to Potosi, and now he's on it. He's not sure yet of exactly what he's going to do, but making this morning a day of vengeance seems like a good idea. Vengeance overdue.

Jake the Snake lives in Potosi.

Samson drives faster, faster. He has to beat the dawn. He fiddles with the radio, but decides all he wants is the whistle of the wind and the rush of the air conditioner turned on high.

He glances over at the passenger seat and sees in the dim green glow of the dash lights the new issue of *Goliath* magazine. Iron Man Mike is on the cover, a cocky red-headed kid in his mid-twenties whose head is way too small for his body. He looks like a carnival freak. In the picture he wears a cocky grin and the world championship belt of The World Wrestling Association. Samson opens his window and tosses the magazine out.

Samson has been on the cover of *Goliath*—four times in fact—but not since 1955. He picked up the latest issue of the magazine at the Dallas Gardens last evening and glanced through it before his bout, looking for any mention of himself, but there was none.

This latest issue contained yet another story about the late great Bobby Morris. The son of a bitch. An anonymous source contacted the editors of *Goliath* with the amazing story that Bobby Morris faked his death in 1954 so that he could become a secret agent for the United States government and help defend the country against the Communist threat. The White House, the FBI, and the CIA refused to respond to the questions posed by the editors of *s*, thereby raising suspicions that the anonymous caller's allegations possessed more than a little validity.

Samson, watching the needle of the speedometer flirt with one hundred and thinking about the Bobby Morris story, gets even madder than he already was. Morris is dead. Dead. Rotted in the ground. "I work my butt off," Samson says aloud. "A cocky kid and a dead man get more attention." He slaps the dashboard. Shit, his hand hurts. And his foot. His nose. Too many bouts for too many years. Also, the top of his ear, the one mutilated by Jake the Snake. The part that hurts is the part that's gone. Phantom ear.

Samson knows that Jake had a match in Altus, Oklahoma, last night. Today, he'll be in Lawton for a bout with Ed Powers, the former lineman for the Chicago Bears. Jake's house will be empty. Samson will probably be able to do whatever he wants to the place.

Jake used to be married, but his wife got smart years ago and walked out. He never mentions her, but he's always standing around in locker rooms before bouts, stinking up the place with his cigars and talking about some whore and every little thing she did to him or about his dogs. Jake has two hound dogs, a male and a female, to keep him company. He brags about what good hunting dogs they are, what good watch dogs they are, how they can do all kinds of incredible tricks (turn somersaults, count to seven). He claims they like to drink beer (they prefer Lone Star over all other brands), he wishes he could teach them to play poker, and if he could get the one that's a bitch to give him head he'd be content to avoid all contact with human beings.

Samson decides he'll kill them. He'll take the jack handle out of his trunk and smash their dog brains all over Jake the Snake's house.

He touches his ear. From the start way back in 1945, Samson the Strong Man's opponents have often tried to cut his hair. He got scratched and stuck slightly with a lot of scissors over the years before the night Jake the Snake decided a pair of shrub shears would be more dramatic than scissors, like a big gun as opposed to a little gun. Baby Bruce—who was sometimes Jake the Snake's partner in tag-team bouts and whose gimmick was that he sucked giant lollipops before matches and wailed like a baby whenever an opponent hurt him—stood by the ring and handed the big black-handled clippers to Jake while Samson the Strong Man lay unconscious from Jake's sleeper hold.

Jake has claimed that the accident was actually Samson's fault because he started to regain consciousness a moment too soon and turned his head just as Jake was going to snip a little lock of his hair off. It was going to be just two or three inches that Jake would hold up proudly and show off to the TV announcer after the match.

There was a grating, squeaky sound of the blades sliding against each other. Then a sharp, burning pain. Samson jumped up screaming, clutching the side of his head. His hand came away red. Blood ran down his face, his neck, his shoulder, his arm. At the sight of that sad little hunk of meat, a half circle, lying on the canvas, he fainted.

Samson has never been to Jake the Snake's house, but he knows Potosi is not a big place. On the outskirts of town, he stops at a phone booth and looks up "Jack Hinterlong" (Jake's real name) in the phone book to get the address. He asks for directions at a gas station that has just opened for the day's business.

By the time he finds the place, the sky is starting to lighten. Jake's house is at the end of a dead-end dirt lane. Railroad tracks run a couple of hundred feet behind it. Samson parks in the road, keeps the engine running. He looks around. The windows of the neighbors' houses are dark.

Jake's house is made out of white-washed concrete blocks and has a flat tin roof. Three rusty old cars—a Studebaker, a Plymouth, and a Buick—sit in the front yard. The driveway is empty. The grass is dead. The neighbors' places look pretty much like Jake's. Samson thinks about what Jake spends money

on: a new Lincoln Continental each year and expensive suits and a lot of booze and five or six whores a week.

Samson opens the trunk and takes out the jack handle. It feels heavy. He's sweating, and his heart is thumping. Goddamn dogs. Goddamn Jake. Goddamn Candy. Goddamn Larry—whoever the hell he is.

Son of a bitch, his gut suddenly hurts, and he thinks he might puke. His chest hurts, too. Heart attack, he thinks. Like his daddy. "Please, God, let me kill the dogs first."

His heart burns with hate, with envy, with frustration. *He* should be the world champ, not Iron Man Mike.

The back yard is full of dog turds. Two dog houses stand in the middle of the yard. They're big clapboard constructions painted white with green trim around the doors and around the little windows each dog house has on its sides; the roofs are peaked and have green shingles; there's fancy gingerbread trim above the doors on which the dogs' names are painted in red: "Mona" and "Ralph." Samson remembers Jake saying he named his dogs after his brother and an old girlfriend. The fence around the yard is just a rusty wire thing three feet high. The dogs are asleep inside their houses. Samson sees their rear ends sticking out the doors.

He will wake them up. He will stay outside the fence. When they run over to him, he will raise the jack handle over his head and then bring it down. Crunch. A few more hits. Splat. Simple enough.

Samson looks around at the house next door. A black joy fills his chest. The ground is shaking. At first, he doesn't know what's happening, then realizes a train is coming. The train's roar builds as he glares at the dogs' rear ends and slaps his left palm with the jack handle. The roar builds until his whole body vibrates with it. His teeth rattle.

Then the roar fades, and he whispers, "Here, doggy, doggy. Here, Mona. Here, Ralph."

The dogs stir. He expected them to race at him, leap onto the fence, let loose with growls and a bark or two before he killed them. But they heave themselves up slowly, crawl backwards out of their houses, and amble over to him. A couple of old hound dogs with sad, droopy jowls.

Except for the husky breathing of the dogs, the morning is silent now. The sun spies on Samson from the edge of the earth. The sky pales above his head, is a dozen colors on the horizon. He stares at the dogs' big watery eyes. He can't believe these humble, decrepit, gentle things are connected with Jake the Snake. Samson stares at the fancy dog houses. Jake truly loves these animals. And they probably love him.

Samson hears the squeak of a screen door and turns toward the next-door neighbor's house. A wiry man in boxer shorts and cowboy boots stands on the stoop of his back door, squinting at Samson. "Hey. Hey, you. What you doin'?"

Samson drops the jack handle and bolts. His chest aches. His head fills with a roar. Another train. But when he looks back he doesn't see one.

To his horror, the Cadillac has stalled out. He turns the key, pumps the gas pedal. He looks over his shoulder and sees the wiry man coming after him with the jack handle. The engine turns over but doesn't catch; it grinds and grinds.

"Hey, you. Hey, stop, you."

The engine finally catches, and the Cadillac's tires dig into the dirt; the car shimmies, then shoots forward.

Samson's chest hurts like hell. His stomach churns. His foot hurts. His hand hurts. His nose hurts. His ear hurts. Oh, he deserves to hurt. He is a son of a bitch. God is punishing him for being evil.

Samson has sense enough to watch his speed. He wonders whether the police will check the jack handle for fingerprints. He doesn't know why he dropped it.

The wiry man probably read his license plate. Lord.

But a few miles down the road, with no sirens approaching, he tells himself he did nothing. Only if someone could read his mind would anyone know that he was guilty of attempted premeditated dog murder.

Jake loves those dogs. The jerk loves them. Samson shakes his head, thinks of Candy.

He sees a hitch hiker, a bum, up ahead, beckoning. And Samson slows down, puts his turn signal on. The guy's grinning a crazy toothy grin, limbering up his mouth to do some serious yakking, but Samson has already made up his mind that this time *he's* doing the talking. ■

# The First Snowfall

BY C. MICHAEL MCKINNEY

The young boy plowed through knee-deep snow stretching his legs full-length to reach his father's last footstep. The large hunting boots left chasms into which he could step securely, keep his head bowed, and avoid the cutting wind that burned his cheeks and the tip of his nose.

Matt Jensen paid strict attention to the snow holes left by his father, calculating when and where to move behind him to stay warm. Seven hunting seasons earlier, when he was five, he could lag four steps before the wind would swirl the snow around his father's large frame and cover up his trail. But Matt was taller now. His longer stride made it easier to stay closer to his windbreak.

"How are you doing back there?" his father's voice broke the gray silence.

"I'm okay. Wish the sun was out, though. My face is cold," Matt said.

The cold wind stung his eyes, and he blinked rapidly trying to clear the protective film of tears that was blurring his vision. A double barrel shotgun rested on his father's right shoulder, pointing skyward over Matt's head. He knew that as long as his father carried the gun this way nothing was happening, but he asked anyway.

"Are the dogs finding anything?"

"Spot's acting a little birdy, but there won't be any birds out in the open in this wind. They'll be down in the bottom, holding cover," his father said. "Is that new gun getting heavy yet?"

"A little," Matt replied.

"Well, make sure the safety's on."

He became aware of the death grip he had on his twelfth birthday present. The muscles in his hands and fingers were cramped closed and resisted