

TALE OF TALES

My father would warn me, never admit to a crime especially a capitol one. He'd say more men are in prison or on death row because they either boasted to or confided in a friend or lover. He would shake his head while keeping his eyes fixed on mine through the heavy plate glass separating us while saying: "The only one you can trust is yourself. Keep your mouth shut. Confession may be good for the soul, but it's hell when you're facing fifteen to life." I lived by his advice, figuring he should know. He would repeat it at the end of each visit. Same words, same tone. His words would echo in my head every time I got the urge to share a darker part of my life. Instead, I relate a story about something that happened to a friend.

At any rate, there was this guy I once knew. The story was told to me by his wife. She never pried into his past but there were those times when he drifted off in his memories and began to talk.

Amy was sitting silent across the kitchen table, watching her husband swirl the ice cubes in his glass of Jack Daniels. His eyes were fixed on his hand but his mind clearly was somewhere else.

"This friend of mine was righteously proper," Jebadiah softly began. "He was determined not to be like his father. Even moved to San Ysidro, near the Mexican border across from Tijuana just to get as far away as he could from where his old man was serving time. Went to college and all, and landed a good job with a shipping company. Life really was looking fine, especially after he met Yolanda and fell in love. They were engaged to be married and she crossed the border to announce the engagement to her folks."

Jeb paused to take a sip of the Jack Daniels then cleared his throat. "Yolanda never made it back to San Ysidro. Her body was found behind a cantina, raped and throat slashed. My friend went crazy when he received that letter from her sister, telling about her death."

Jeb took another sip and raised his eyes. "My friend crossed the border and didn't return for a while. I heard tell he made the rounds of the cantinas, passing money to the bartenders, quietly picking their minds. I guess he was looking for Yolanda's killer."

"Did he find him?" Amy asked when his eyes seemed to prompt the question.

Jeb's head slowly moved in a nod. "A bartender asked for more pesos then came up with a name. "Muy malo hombre," the drink peddler cautioned my friend. "He has to be the one, senior. He did it before." My friend needed no further confirmation. He set out to find the man."

Jeb took another sip and grimly smiled. "You'd be surprised how easy it was locating someone with that bad a rep. My friend tailed the bastard to a cantina and started buying him beers. He spoke enough Spanish to temper his gringo appearance. For an added measure, he introduced himself as Joaquin, a Norte-born Hispanic. The bastard didn't care as long as my friend was paying for the beer."

Lifting the bottle of Jack Daniels, Jeb refreshed his drink. "They drank for about an hour then my friend suggested they go out behind the cantina for a piss. He followed the bastard past a pile of trash near the back door and put a blade in deep next to the bastard's spine. My friend was pissed and really messed up the bastard before he slowly slit his throat. He stood there for a while, staring at the body then walked down the alley to another cantina. He went in and ordered a Jack Daniels on the rocks. When the drink was served, he raised the glass in a silent toast and took a sip." Jeb mimicked the action as he spoke.

Rising, Jeb went to the sink. He stared at the glass in his hand for a moment then emptied it. "Time to go to bed," he said hoarsely. "Have to get up early. Can't be late for work."

Amy quietly nodded and arose. She knew the story was over. She had heard it several times before, always on the same day and month of the year. Jebadiah was consistent and subtly made the same toast.

Now, you may think Jebadiah broke my father's prime rule by confiding in his wife but not really. He merely related a story about an anonymous friend and a murder across the border where crimes are rarely solved. Every time I pour myself a Jack Daniels, I flash on Jebadiah's friend and distantly wonder, did he kill the right man?

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