

Judgments

by Gary Beck

The minute they walked into the store I knew they were cops, but not locals. Some kind of state boys come up from Cheyenne by the look of them. I started for the bathroom to avoid them, but the meaner looking one, in a blue suit that looked like he found it in a thrift shop, called me.

“Just a minute, sir. We’d like to talk to you.”

I turned to my assistant, Bobby Runs-with-Elks.

“Why don’t you help these gentlemen, Bobby.”

“We need to speak to you, sir,” the oilier looking man said, taking off his sunglasses, revealing black eyes as soulless as lumps of coal.

Bobby, a full-blooded Shoshone, had been working with me for several years, as his father and grandfather before him. He got a small salary and 50% of the profit from the store at the end of the year, which went to his family. We outfitted a lot of hunters and tourists, so it sometimes added up to a good sum of money. I met his grandfather, Joseph Shiny Elk, at Parris Island, in 1968. We served two tours together in Vietnam and saw and did some terrible things. We were both wounded in a sapper attack and invalided out of the Corps at the same time. He didn’t want to go back to the reservation and I didn’t want to work on the oil rigs. So we formed a partnership and opened the general store in the Great Divide Basin, near the Killpecker Sand Dunes, a wild and beautiful place.

Joseph was a part-time deputy on the reservation and late one night on his way home was killed by a drunken driver. His son, Daniel Speaks-to-Elks, took over his share of the business and we got along real well. I never married or had a family, so Daniel was like my son and Bobby like a grandson. They would get the business when I died. I had been around for a while and was pretty fit, still working as a hunting guide now and then, and in no hurry to check out.

I saw there was no way to avoid them and put on my dumb storekeeper face. Bobby had already sensed something and was playing stone faced Indian.

“What can I do for you boys?” Which immediately riled them since they expected to intimidate me.

“We’d like to talk to you in private, sir,” Oily grated.

“Bobby knows everything that goes on here…”

“Alone, sir,” meanie insisted.

“Well we can go out back, though the winds a bit stronger then you Cheyenne boys are used to.”

“What makes you think we’re from Cheyenne?” Oily asked.

“You got that townie look, like you’re used to telling folk what to do,” which annoyed them.

I wasn’t going to take them through my living area, so I led them outside and around the back. There were several wooden chairs and a bench sand stripped down to a smooth surface. I gestured for them to sit. They declined, but I sat, willing to let them think they had an advantage towering above an old man.

Meanie looked at oily, who said:

“I guess this will do”

“Alright, boys,” I said pleasantly. “Who are you and what do you want?”

They both pulled out wallets with badges and oily said:

“We’re criminal investigators from the governor’s office. We’re investigating the accident that destroyed the Grand Teton Resort and Hunting Lodge and led to a number of deaths.”

“What has that to do with me?”

“We heard you know Sam Zona. He may have been involved somehow in the destruction of the place.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“But you know Sam Zona,” oily insisted.

“He’s dead?”

“We don’t know. Now you know him.”

“Yeah. Casual like.”

“You know him better then that. He worked for you for several years when he was a teen-ager,” oily stated.

I just shrugged and meanie glared.

“We can make things difficult for you if you don’t cooperate,” meanie threatened.

I guessed they could and it would hurt Daniel and Bobby, so I decided to tell them whatever was common knowledge.

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell us about his background,” oily said. “Start with his parents.”

“I don’t know much about them. Manny came from up North someplace and married a Shoshone woman. They lived on the rez for a long time, but didn’t have kids. There was a story that an old medicine man told them they’d have a son, if they left the reservation and saved the injured animals.”

Meanie laughed. “We don’t believe in witchcraft.”

“Well they started a small ranch in the Great Divide Basin and they took in all kinds of hurt critters, birds, antelope, wolves, they even had a bear for a while…”

“Sounds like a fairy tale to me,” oily sneered. “How’d they make a living?”

“Manny captured wild horses and sold them… Now do you want to hear what I got to say? If not, go back to the city.”

“Go on,” oily said.

“Sam was an exceptionally strong and bright kid. He rode to school on the rez on his pony five days a week. At first some of the older kids tried to bully him. Calling him a half-breed, but he fought back and beat them until they left him alone. He was twelve years old when he was riding home one day and his pony stumbled on a rock. Sam got off to check his hoof and a big cougar went for the horse. Sam grabbed the cat and they fought and he killed it…”

“Bullshit!” meanie growled. “No kid that age could kill a cougar without a rifle.”

I concealed my growing anger and replied:

“I don’t need to talk to you…”

“Ray didn’t mean to insult you,” oily said. “The story seems a little far-fetched. Tell us the rest.”

“Sam got bigger and stronger. When he was about sixteen he went to town, which was mostly owned by Mr. Phillips’ oil company. He met a waitress at the diner and he really liked her, but the riggers and roughnecks told him to leave her alone. There was a big fight and he whipped a lot of them, but she was scared and wouldn’t be with him. One of the roughnecks said she had a younger sister, if he’d wait for her, but Sam refused. Then someone from the oil company offered him a job. When he said ‘no’, the man said wildfires could burn his family’s ranch. Sam didn’t like that and punched him. That night he caught a couple of coyotes, tied torches on their tails and sent them into the oilfield. A couple of rigs burned, costing the company a lot of money, but they couldn’t prove it was Sam.”

“You’re saying he did it?” Meanie demanded.

“It was just a rumor.”

“What happened next?” Oily prompted.

“His mother and father were attacked in town one day. Some say the oil company was behind it, but no one knows. Then a bunch of men went to their ranch and tried to burn it, but there was a big fight and Sam chased them away. Nothing happened for a while, then the oil company started pressing the ranchers to sell. A couple of them went to see Sam and asked for help. He set up a nightwatch system to warn them if there was an attack. One night a bunch of thugs from the oil company came to a ranch that Sam was guarding. He ambushed them, beat them, then sent them back to town naked. They complained to the sheriff, who owed his job to Mr. Phillips, who said he’d look into it. On the advice of his friends, Sam joined the Marine Corps and went away for a while.”

“But something else happened before he joined the Marines,” oily prompted.

I quickly reviewed the event to be sure I told the same story that was in the record.

“He came home from school on the rez one day and found his parents dead. There had been a gun battle and there was a blood trail heading back to the oil rigs. He followed the trail and found three men wounded on the side of the road. They were trying to decide whether to go to the hospital, or go ask the boss to get them a doctor. They fought and Sam killed them. The sheriff, who was owned by the oil company, ignored the murder of Sam’s parents and started building a case against him. That’s when Sam joined the Corps.”

I didn’t tell them that he came to me for advice. I told him to join the Corps and that Bobby or Daniel would take care of his ranch. Oily kept eyeing me, trying to figure out how smart I was, but I made sure to look as dumb as possible.

“So how long was he gone?” Meanie demanded.

I shrugged. “Maybe two or three years. He was wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan and they discharged him. He came home to the ranch and did the same thing as his dad. He tamed wild horses and sold them and took care of injured animals.”

“The record shows he got into trouble sometime after that,” meanie said and pulled out a tablet and looked at the screen.

“He got into a fight, but the charges were dismissed.”

“He’s a real troublemaker,” meanie remarked, “always getting into fights.”

“Not so,” I snapped. “He was seeing some girl who worked as a bartender at the Last Chance Saloon. Her ex-boyfriend and some of his oil worker buddies jumped Sam one night. He beat them so badly they went to the hospital. The sheriff wanted to arrest him, but witnesses saw what happened and defended Sam and said the hooligans started it. Friends of the injured oil workers wanted revenge and they went to the ranch one night. They brought an old pickup truck, set it on fire and aimed it at the ranch house. Sam stopped the truck and pushed it back into their jeeps and trucks and they blew up. A lot of the men got burned, but nobody died. They couldn’t complain to the sheriff and they were afraid of Sam, so they left him alone after that.”

“Are you telling us he pushed the truck by himself?” Meanie sneered.

“Sam’s a strong guy,” I said softly.

“What happened after that?” Oily asked.

“Things were pretty quiet for a while.”

“Until Mr. Phillips wanted to build his resort,” oily stated.

“I don’t know about that,” I muttered.

“Bullshit!” meanie yelled. “Tell us what you know.”

I briefly considered giving them the shock of their lives when this old man kicked both their asses. But I realized they’d be back with reinforcements, so I told them the public version.

“The oil company took over most of the land in the Great Divide Basin for their oil rigs. Nobody who cares about the land wanted that, but Mr. Phillips is a rich and powerful man. One way or another he got what he wanted…”

“Talk more respectful about him,” meanie demanded. “He’s a friend of the governor.”

I was getting fed up with these hired badges, but before I could respond, oily said:

“Alright. Take it easy, guys. We’re just getting to what brought us here.” He looked at me and said: “Go on.”

I guess I decided to take the easy way out because I didn’t want any more trouble for Sam. It was probably a waste of time trying to make these jerks understand how some of us felt about the land, but I made one last effort.

“The Red Desert is the largest unfenced area in the 48 continental states. It’s got all kinds of animals and birds and should be preserved.”

“Yeah. Nice Dream,” meanie muttered. “But there’s oil there and money to be made.”

“There are more important things than money,” I responded.

Oily held up a placating hand. “Go on.”

“Mr. Phillips decided to build a big resort. I don’t know how he got the rights to public land. Probably bribery and threats…”

“That’s slander,” meanie yelled.

“Take it easy, Ray,” oily urged. “Hear the man out.”

By this time I was resisting the temptation to go inside, get my 1911 Model Colt .45 and send them on their way, but it would have meant trouble. So…

“One way or the other Mr. Phillips got a hold of most of the property he wanted. Sam led the fight to protect the environment and supported the holdouts who wouldn’t sell. About this time a woman came to town, Delia something. I don’t know her last name. She was real high class city type, and the sexiest looking woman I ever saw. Sam fell for her hard. I don’t know how she did it, but she cast a spell on him or something and he followed her around like a puppy. She got into his head and started him on drugs. He went downhill fast. He stopped protesting the land sales and challenging the building permits. He got weaker and weaker, ran out of money and lost his ranch. Then she dumped him. Some of his friends claim they saw her with Mr. Phillips.”

“What do you think?” Oily asked.

I shrugged. “What do I know? But it was a little strange that a slick woman like that would come here and get involved with a guy like Sam.”

“Are you accusing Mr. Phillips of using her to get him?” Meanie challenged.

“I’m just telling you what I heard.”

“You know about the explosion that destroyed the resort and killed all those people, including Mr. Phillips.”

“There was some talk about that, but I haven’t been there.”

“But you heard about it,” oily said.

“Yeah.”

“Do you know where Sam Zona is?” Oily asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I said no.”

Oily said to meanie. ”Let’s go.”

As they were leaving, meanie turned to me. “We’ll be back.”

I didn’t say anything, watched them get into their SUV and drive off. Bobby came outside and stood next to me, watching the dust plume recede in the distance.

“I was listening from the back window. Is there any way those guys can find out that Sam bought that load of black powder from us?”

“Not if we don’t say anything. There’s no receipt or anything is there?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“You think Sam blew up the place?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he now?”

“Dead along with the others.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know Sam. He was reduced to a wreck of a man who had nothing left. They laughed at him on the streets and weren’t afraid of him anymore. They took away everything he had, then built that temple of luxury to destroy the land he loved. I knew what he was going to do when he bought that powder.”

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

“It was his choice, Bobby. He pulled himself together for one last fight and took his enemies with him.”

“That’s it? That’s all you got to say?”

I smiled. “Too bad the governor wasn’t there.”

He stared at me wide-eyed for a moment, then laughed and I laughed with him.

**Gary Beck** has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 40 poetry collections, 16 novels, 4 short story collections, 2 collection of essays and 8 books of plays. Gary lives in New York City.