

Ghostslinger

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Flame and thunder spewed six times from the barrel of the ivory-handled Colt .45, filling the still air with acrid smoke. On the other side of the narrow street of Penuel, Kansas, the victim, his stiff fingers still clutching his drawn but unfired gun, toppled backwards into the dust.

The new widow screamed and rushed to her fallen husband. A small boy—now fatherless—ran behind her. Their sobs echoed in Jacob Remington's ears as he spun on his heel and sauntered toward the saloon, an old bullet wound in his left hip causing a barely perceptible limp. As he walked he shook the spent cartridges out of the cylinder and inserted six new bullets taken from the loops in his gunbelt.

His hardened but boyish face seemed to concentrate on his gun, but from under the brim of his grey hat, Jacob's blue eyes scanned the gathered townsfolk for signs of trouble. Except for the widow and her son, they were all as passive as grazing cattle.

A sudden gust of wind rolled a tumbleweed down the street and drove dust into Jacob's eyes. Blinking, he turned his face away from the wind. That's when he first noticed the old man.

The distinguished silver-haired gentleman, standing in the shadow of a doorway, wore a fine black suit—the kind, Jacob thought, most people wear only for church or burial. He also looked familiar—but Jacob could not place the face. Anyway, since he had no gun, he was no threat.

The swinging doors creaked loudly as Jacob entered the saloon. Conversations inside ceased. All eyes briefly turned toward him, then looked away. For an instant the expressions on all the faces were the same—a combination of fear and contempt. Jacob knew the look well.

„Whiskey,“ he growled to the bartender. Taking the glass and bottle, he sat, as usual, alone at a back table facing the door. He always kept his back toward a wall and his gun ready.

After muted conversations started again, Jacob pulled out his bowie knife and his gun. As he carved the latest notch in the handle, images of the widow and her boy haunted his mind. He gulped down his remaining whiskey. Usually the men he'd killed had been single or at least had no family present. This was a hard one.

He ordered more whiskey to ease his mental discomfort. As he did he noticed the silver-haired gentleman again. The man stood just outside the saloon, gazing at Jacob through the window. Jacob glanced down at his empty glass. He'd seen many expressions of fear and contempt before, but this old man showed neither. Rather, his face conveyed sympathy and concern. Since that made no sense, Jacob did not know how to react.

Minutes passed and the old man continued looking at him. He must want trouble, Jacob finally thought. His chair tumbled backwards as Jacob vaulted to his feet. His boots pounded across the rough pine floor. He burst through the swinging doors, his right hand hovering near his gun.

„What do you want, Old Man?“

„I want to talk with you,“ was the serene answer.

„What about?“

„Your future.“

„You want a hired gun?“

„Not exactly. It's a long story.“

„Start with what's in it for me.“

„Peace for your tormented soul.“

„Oh, I see,“ Jacob snorted. „You're a preacher and want to save my soul from hellfire. Well, save your breath because I'm beyond hope.“

„You're mistaken on both counts. There is still hope for you, and I was never a preacher. I was a gunslinger like you. Exactly like you.“

„I've seen you somewhere before then—on a wanted poster maybe?“

„You've seen me every day of your life, Jacob Remington.“

Jacob was losing patience. „So you know my name. Who are you?“

„My name,“ the old man replied, „is also Jacob Remington.“

„I'm not in the mood for jokes.“

„No joke. My name is real and is the same as yours. Don't I remind you of someone?“

Jacob studied the man's face. The old man's blue eyes gazed evenly back into Jacob's blue eyes. „Yes, you look like my father. I get it now. You're some long-lost uncle that my father named me after. Well, I'd rather you stayed lost, Uncle, because I hated my father.“

„I know. Your cruel father made you what you are. Throughout your childhood he wounded you with bullets formed from anger, selfishness, and pride. Now **you** use bullets made of lead.“

„I don't want to talk about him, Uncle.“

„I am not your uncle. We are both the one and only Jacob Remington. Although I'm decades older, I'm you. You're me. I told you it was a long story.“

„This is crazy talk. How could you be me?“

„I'm your ghost from an alternate future.“

„That's it! You have ten minutes to get out of town, or you'll be the next notch in my gun. Then you'll really be a ghost.“

„I already am, Jacob. Take a look in the window.“

Jacob didn't want to look, yet felt compelled to do so. Inside the saloon all the men were staring at him with puzzlement on their faces. „Why are they looking at me like that?“

„They think you're out here alone talking to yourself.“

„Why would they think a stupid thing like that? You're standing here in front of the window too.“

„They can't see me.“

„And why not?“

„I'm a ghost—your ghost. Only you can see me. No one else—not even a mirror. Take a look at the **reflection** in the window.“

Jacob changed the focus of his eyes. Since the saloon's interior was dim and he was standing in the sunlight, he could see his own faint but distinct reflection in the window. Where the old man's reflection **should** have been, however, there was only an image of an empty street.

„This is some kind of trick.“

„If you want more proof, then call me out. Ghosts don't bleed.“

„Old Man, I'm feeling extra generous today, so I'm giving you one last chance. Get out of town **now**, and I won't kill you.“

„I'm not leaving without you. Let's settle this out here.“ The old man turned and walked toward the red dust in the center of the street.

„You are crazy. You don't even have a...gun.“ Jacob stared at the ivory-handled revolver that had suddenly and mysteriously appeared on the old man's thigh. The gun and belt looked exactly like Jacob's—even with the same number of notches in the handle.

Jacob followed slowly, feeling his old bullet wound. The old man also favored his left leg, limping in exactly the same manner. Jacob licked his dry lips and rubbed the sweat from his fingers. The sun was beating down on him, but he felt cold.

Jacob took his position in the street like so many times before, but never with such uncertainty in his mind. He wavered for an instant, but then his resolve hardened again. At the age of 16, after an abused childhood, Jacob had vowed he would never let anyone beat him again. In his current occupation, defeat meant death, and he would choose death rather than back down from a fight.

„Make your move, Old Man, and we'll put an end to this foolishness.“

The man went for his gun, but before he had yanked it out of the holster, Jacob had blasted his first bullet toward the old man's heart. Three more bullets followed split-seconds later. Jacob stopped fanning his gun. The man still stood there, unflinching, with his hand resting lightly on his holstered gun. The man smiled. „See.“

Jacob walked five paces forward, took careful aim, and fired again. The man continued smiling.

Trembling, Jacob slowly walked right up to the man, put his gun's muzzle on the man's sternum and fired. Over the man's shoulder he saw his last bullet kick up dust twenty yards down the street.

„Now do you believe me?“

Jacob could only hoarsely whisper, „What do you want from me?“

„Like I said before, I want to talk with you. I also have something to show you. You're not a coward are you?“

Jacob shook his head, but he wasn't as certain as before.

„I know you're not. At the first light of dawn tomorrow morning, pack up your horse, leave town, and ride out to the cemetery before sunrise. I'll meet you there.“

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An unseen rooster crowed as Jacob walked his charcoal-grey horse slowly through the dense fog. The fog, blotting out all vision beyond a few yards, was the thickest Jacob could ever remember, and it grew colder and thicker with every step. He shivered and pulled his coat more tightly around him, but the cold mist was not all that chilled him.

The graveyard lay only a few hundred yards outside of town, but the distance seemed like miles. Following the meandering Jabbok Creek was the only way of navigating through the enshrouding gloom. At last the stream curved around a low hill with a dozen tombstones jutting above the dew-covered prairie grass. Jacob's ghost stepped out of the swirling mist into the middle of the stones.

Jacob swallowed hard. „Are you going to kill me now?“

„Of course not. I want you to **live** as you were meant to live.“

„Why did I have to meet you **here**?“

„Because I've a tale to tell, and cemeteries provide the best atmosphere for ghost stories.“

„Tell me then. What does that alternate future stuff mean?“

„I'll start by telling you your destiny as it exists at this very moment in time. I wouldn't need any supernatural knowledge to predict it. As a gunfighter you live by your wits and your speed, but eventually your reflexes slow and you meet someone faster. Gunslingers don't grow old.“

„You're old.“

„I put up my gun when I was your age in my timeline. I've come back to make sure you do the same.“

„Why?“

„Because time is not stone. Our choices make a difference. You are at a critical junction. Yesterday that widow and son hurt you deep down inside. This is your

final opportunity to repent, to turn around. If you harden yourself and kill again, nothing will ever change you and you will be damned.“

„I’m hardly the first person to damn himself. Why go to all this trouble for me?“

„There’s more at stake than just you. Time amplifies small events. If you continue to kill, you will kill three more men. If you put up your gun, those men will live. Some of their descendants will be crucial to history. One, a diplomat, will prevent a third world-wide war. Another, a researcher, will discover a cure for a lethal disease called AIDS. Other descendants will not be so memorable, but they will still be precious human lives. But if you kill the three men, generations throughout the centuries will also be doomed.“

„That’s...not my problem.“

„You will have a problem. The fourth man you call out will be a little quicker than you. Take a look.“ Jacob’s ghost moved to one side. Jacob saw a tombstone that read, „Jacob Remington, July 15, 1890.“

„That’s two months from now.“

„Yes, unless you turn away from the killing, you will die, and your children and their children will never be born. I know your seared conscience is still alive—just barely—but still alive. I know the faces of those you’ve killed haunt your dreams. You use whiskey to forget them, but it doesn’t last. You’re in bondage to your gun. Hang up your gun. Walk away from the killing.“

„But being a gunslinger is what I am. I’ve killed men for revenge, sport, and money. I once vowed never to walk away from a fight. It’s too late for me to change.“

„No, it’s not too late. Not yet. Though your past shaped you, you have the power to stop the downward spiral of violence. You can stop it now.“

„If I give up my gun, then what do I do?“

„You will have to discover that on your own.“

„If I keep my gun and die in two months, what happens to you? You lived much longer.“

„I’m just a ghost, so it doesn’t matter. What matters is how you live out the rest of your life—however long that may be.“ There was a moment of silence between them—silent except for the songs of the waking birds. The fog was beginning to lighten as the sun crept over the horizon. „I must leave. I’ve said all I can. The correct choice is obvious, but you must decide for yourself.“

The ghost started to walk away into the mist. Jacob yelled, „Wait!“ He stared at his tombstone and his hand wavered near his gun. Finally, he sighed deeply—and broke his vow.

„You win,“ Jacob moaned. He slowly unhooked his gunbelt and held it out. „Here, take it.“

„No. You keep it—but keep it hanging on a wall.“ The ghost patted the ivory-handled gun at his own side and then, just before vanishing, said, „You’ll need it one final time.“

Jacob gazed at his own tombstone for another long moment and then put his gunbelt into his saddlebag. Nudging his steed, he crossed the shallow creek and began his journey to the next town. As he rode toward the sunrise, his tombstone dissolved into mist, and the risen sun burned away the fog.
