

Jugged

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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STAN CASS, HIS elbows leaning on the edge of the rolltop desk, glanced over his shoulder as he said, „Take a look how I made this one out.”

Marshal John Boynton had just come in. He was standing in the front door of the jail office, one finger absently stroking his full mustache. He looked at his regular deputy, Hanley Miller, who stood next to a chair where a young man sat leaning forward looking at his hands.

„What’s the matter with him?” Boynton said, ignoring Stan Cass.

Hanley Miller put his hand on the back of the chair. „A combination of things, John. He’s had too many, been beat up, and now he’s tired.”

„He looks tired,” Boynton said, again glancing at the silent young man.

Stan Cass turned his head. „He looks like a smart-aleck kid.”

Boynton walked over to Cass and picked up the record book from the desk. The last entry read:

NAME: Pete Given.

DESCRIPTION: Nineteen. Medium height and build. Brown hair and eyes. Small scar under chin.

RESIDENCE: Dos Cabezas.

OCCUPATION: Mustanger.

CHARGE: Drunk and disorderly.

COMMENTS: Has to pay a quarter share of the damages in the Continental Saloon whatever they are decided to be.

Boynton handed the record book to Cass. „You spelled nineteen wrong.“

„Is that all?“

„How do you know he has to pay a quarter of the damages?“

„Being four of them,“ Cass said mock seriously. „I figured to myself: Now, if they have to chip in for what’s busted, how much would—“

„That’s for the judge to say. What were they doing here?“

„They delivered a string to the stage line,“ Cass answered. He was a man in his early twenties, clean shaven, though his sideburns extended down to the curve of his jaw. He was smoking a cigarette and he spoke to Boynton as if he were bored.

„And they tried to spend all the profit in one night,“ Boynton said.

Cass shrugged indifferently. „I guess so.“

Boynton’s finger stroked his mustache and he was thinking: Somebody’s going to bust his nose for him. He asked, civilly, „Where’re the other three?“

Cass nodded to the door that led back to the first-floor cell. „Where else?“

Hanley Miller, the regular night deputy, a man in his late forties, said, „John, you know there’s only room for three in there. I was wondering what to do with this boy.“ He tipped his head toward the quiet young man sitting in the chair.

„He’ll have to go upstairs,“ Boynton said.

„With Obie Ward?“

„I guess he’ll have to.“ Boynton nodded to the boy. „Pull him up.“

Hanley Miller got the sleepy boy on his feet.

Cass shook his head watching them. „Obie Ward’s got everybody buffaloed. I’ll be a son of a gun if he ain’t got everybody buffaloed.“

Boynton’s eyes dropped to Cass, but he did not say anything.

„I’m just saying that Obie Ward don’t look so tough,“ Cass said.

„Act like you’ve got some sense once in a while,“ Boynton said now.

He had hired Cass the week before as an extra night guard—the day they brought in Obie Ward—but he was certain now he would not keep Cass. Tomorrow he would look around for somebody else. Somebody who didn’t talk so much and didn’t have such a proud opinion of himself.

„All I’m saying is he don’t look so tough to me,“ Cass repeated.

Boynton ignored him. He looked at the young man, Pete Given, standing next to Hanley now with his eyes closed, and he heard his deputy say, „The boy’s asleep on his feet.“

„He looks familiar,“ Boynton said.

„We had him here about three months ago.“

„Same thing?“

Hanley nodded. „Delivered his horses, then stopped off at the Continental. Remember, his wife come here looking for him. He was here five days because the judge was away and she got here court day. Pretty little thing with light-colored hair? Not more’n seventeen. Come all the way from Dos Cabezas by herself.“

„Least he had sense enough to get a good woman,“ Boynton said.

He seemed to hesitate. Then: „You and I'll take him up.” He slipped his revolver from its holster and placed it on the desk. He took young Pete Given's arm then and raised it up over his shoulder, glancing at his deputy again. „Hanley, you come behind with your shotgun.“

Cass watched them go through the door and down the hall to the back of the jail to the outside stairway, and he was thinking: Won't even wear his gun up there, he's so scared. That's some man to work for, won't even wear his gun when he goes in Ward's cell. He shook his head and said the name again, contemptuously. Obie Ward. He'd pull his tough act on me just once.

PETE GIVEN OPENED his eyes. Lying on his right side his face was close to the wall and for a moment, seeing the chipped and peeling adobe and smelling the stale mildewed smell of the mattress which did not have a cover on it, he did not know where he was. Then he remembered, and he closed his eyes again.

The sour taste of whiskey coated his mouth and he lay very still, waiting for the throbbing to start in his head. But it did not come. He raised his head and moved closer to the wall and felt the edge of the mattress cool and firm against his cheek. Still the throbbing did not come. There was a dull tight feeling at the base of his skull, but not the shooting sharp pain he had expected. That was good. He moved his toes and could feel his boots still on and there was no blanket covering him. They just dumped you here, he thought. He made saliva in his mouth and kept swallowing until his mouth did not feel sticky and some of the sour taste went away. Well, what did you expect?

It's about all you deserve, buddy. No, it's more'n you deserve.

You'll learn, huh?

He thought of his wife, Mary Ellen, and his eyes closed tighter and for a moment he tried not to think of anything.

How do I do this? How do I get something good, then kick it away like it's not worth anything?

What'll you tell her this time?

Mary Ellen, honest to gosh, we just went in to get one drink. We sold the horses and got something to eat and figured one drink before starting back. Then Art said one more. All right, just one, I told him.

But, you know, we were relaxed—and laughing. That's hard work running a thirty-horse string for five days. Harry got in a blackjack game.

The rest of us were just sitting relaxed. When you're sitting like that the time seems to go faster. We had a few drinks. Maybe four—five at the most. Like I said, we were laughing and Art was telling some stories.

You know Art, he keeps talking—then there's a commotion over at the blackjack table and we see Harry haulin' off at this man. And—

And Mary Ellen will say, „Just like the last time,” not raising her voice or seeming mad, but she'll keep looking you right in the eye.

„Honey, those things just happen. I can't help it. And it wasn't just like last time.”

„The result's the same,” she'll say. „You work hard for three months to earn decent money then pay it all out in fines and damages.”

„Not all of it.“

„It might as well be all. We can't live on what's left.”

„But I can't help it. Can't you see that? Harry got in a fight and we had to help him. It's just one of those things that happens. You can't help it.”

„But it seems a little silly, doesn't it?“

„Mary Ellen, you don't understand.“

„Doesn't throwing away three months' profit in one night seem silly to you?“

„You don't understand.“

You can be married to a girl for almost a year and think you know her and you don't know her at all. That's it. You know how she talks, but you don't know what she's thinking. That's a big difference. But there's some things you can't explain to a woman anyway.

He felt a little better. Facing her would not be pleasant—but it still wasn't his fault.

He rolled over, momentarily studying the ceiling, then he let his head roll on the mattress and he saw the man on the other bunk watching him. He was sitting hunched over, making a cigarette.

Pete Given closed his eyes and he could still see the man. He didn't seem big, but he had a stringy hard-boned look. Sharp cheekbones and dull-black hair that was cut short and brushed forward to his forehead.

No mustache, but he needed a shave and it gave the appearance of an almost full-grown mustache.

He opened his eyes again. The man was drawing on the cigarette, still watching him.

„What time you think it is?“ Given asked.

„About nine.“ The man's voice was clear though he barely moved his mouth.

Given said, „If you were one of them over to the Continental I'd just as soon shake hands this morning.“

The man did not reply.

„You weren't there, then?“

„No,“ he said now.

„What've they got you for?“

„They say I shot a man.“

„Oh.“

„Fact is, they say I shot two men, during the Grant stage holdup.“

„Oh.“

„When the judge comes tomorrow, he'll set a court date. Give the witnesses time to get here.“ He stood up, saying this. He was tall, above average, but not heavy.

„Are you“—Given hesitated—„Obie Ward?“

The man nodded, drawing on the cigarette.

„Somebody last night said you were here. I'd forgot about it.“ Given spoke louder, trying to make his voice sound natural, and now he raised himself on an elbow. Obie Ward asked, „Were you drinking last night?“

„Some.“

„And got in a fight.“

Given sat up, swinging his legs off the bunk and resting his elbows on his knees. „One of my partners got in trouble and we had to help him.“

„You don't look so good,“ Ward said.

„I feel okay.“

„No,“ Ward said. „You don't look so good.“

„Well, maybe I just look worse'n I am.“

„How's your stomach?“

„It's all right.“

„You look sick to me.“

„I could eat. Outside of that I got no complaint.“ Given stood up.

He put his hands on the small of his back and stretched, feeling the stiffness in his body. Then he raised his arms straight up, stretching again, and yawned. That felt good. He saw Obie Ward coming toward him, and he lowered his arms.

Ward reached out, extending one finger, and poked it at Pete Given's stomach. „How's it feel right there?“

„Honest to gosh, it feels okay.“ He smiled looking at Ward, to show that he was willing to go along with a joke, but he felt suddenly uneasy.

Ward was standing too close to him and Given was thinking: What's the matter with him?—and the same moment he saw the beard-stubbled face tighten.

Ward went back a half step and came forward, driving his left fist into Given's stomach. The boy started to fold, a gasp coming from his open mouth, and Ward followed with his right hand, bringing it up solidly against the boy's jaw, sending him back, arms flung wide, over the bunk and hard against the wall. Given slumped on the mattress and did not move. For a moment Ward looked at him, then picked up his cigarette from the floor and went back to his bunk.

He was sitting on the edge of it when Given opened his eyes—smoking another cigarette, drawing on it and blowing the smoke out slowly.

„Are you sick now?“

Given moved his head, trying to lift it, and it was an effort to do this.

„I think I am.“

Ward started to rise. „Let's make sure.“

„I'm sure.“

WARD RELAXED AGAIN. „I told you so, but you didn't believe me. I been watching you all morning and the more I watched, the more I thought to myself: Now there's a sick boy. Maybe you ought to even have a doctor.“

Given said nothing. He stiffened as Ward rose and came toward him.

„What's the matter? I'm just going to see you're more comfortable.“

Ward leaned over, lifting the boy's legs one at a time, and pulled his boots off, then pushed him, gently, flat on the bunk and covered him with a blanket that was folded at the foot of it. Given looked up, holding his body rigid, and saw Ward shake his head. „You're a mighty sick boy. We got to do something about that.“

Ward crossed the cell to his bunk, and standing at one end, he lifted it a foot off the floor and let it drop. He did this three times, then went down to his hands and knees and, close to the floor, called, „Hey, Marshal!“ He waited. „Marshal, we got a sick boy up here!“ He rose, winking at Given, and sat down on his bunk.

Minutes later a door at the back end of the hallway opened and Boynton came toward the cell. A deputy with a shotgun, his day man, followed him.

„What's the matter?“

Ward nodded. „The boy's sick.“

„He ought to be,“ Boynton said.

Ward shrugged. „Don't matter to me, but I got to listen to him moaning.“

Boynton looked toward Given's bunk. „A man that don't know how to drink has got to expect that.“ He turned abruptly. Their steps moved down the hall and the door slammed closed.

„No sympathy,“ Ward said. He made another cigarette, and when he had lit it he walked over to Given’s bunk. „He’ll come back in about two hours with our dinner. You’ll still be in bed, and this time you’ll be moaning like you got belly cramps. You got that?“

Staring up at him, Given nodded his head stiffly. At a quarter to twelve Boynton came up again. This time he ordered Ward to lie down flat on his bunk. He unlocked the door then and remained in the hall as the day man came in with the dinner tray and placed it in the middle of the floor.

„He still sick?“ Boynton stood in the doorway holding a sawed-off shotgun.

Ward turned his head on the mattress. „Can’t you hear him?“

„He’ll get over it.“

„I think it’s something else,“ Ward said. „I never saw whiskey hold on like that.“

„You a doctor?“

„As much a one as you are.“

Boynton looked toward the boy again. Given’s eyes were closed and he was moaning faintly. „Tell him to eat something,“ Boynton said. „Maybe then he’ll feel better.“

„I’ll do that,“ Ward said. He was smiling as Boynton and his deputy moved off down the hall.

Lying on his back, his head turned on the mattress, Given watched Ward take a plate from the tray. It looked like stew.

„Can I have some?“ Given said.

Chewing, Ward shook his head.

„Why not?“

Ward swallowed. „You’re too sick.“

„Can I ask you a question?“

„Go ahead.“

„How come I’m sick?“

„You haven’t figured it?“

„No.“

„I’ll give you a hint. We’ll get our supper about six. Watch the two that bring it up.“

„I don’t see what they’d have to do with me.“

„You don’t have to see.“

Given was silent for some time. He said then, „It’s got to do with you busting out.“

Obie Ward grinned. „You got a head on your shoulders.“

Boynton came up a half hour later. He stood in the hall and when his deputy brought out the tray, his eyes went from it to Pete Given’s bunk. „The boy didn’t eat a bite,“ Boynton observed.

Ward raised up on his elbow. „Said he couldn’t stand the smell of it.“

He watched Boynton look toward the boy, then sank down on the bunk again as Boynton walked away. When the door down the hall closed, Ward said, „Now he believes it.“

It was quiet in the cell after that. Ward rolled over to face the wall and Pete Given, lying on his back, remained motionless, though his eyes were open and he was studying the ceiling.

He tried to understand Obie Ward’s plan. He tried to see how his being sick could have anything to do with Ward’s breaking out. And he thought: He means what he says, doesn’t he? You can be sure of that much. He’s going to bust out

and you got a part in it and there ain't a damn thing you can do about it. It's that simple, isn't it?

OBIE WARD WAS RIGHT. At what seemed close to six o'clock they heard the door open at the end of the hall and a moment later Stan Cass and Hanley Miller were standing in front of the cell. Hanley opened the door and stood holding a sawed-off shotgun as Cass came in with the tray.

Cass half turned to face Ward sitting on his bunk, then went down to one knee, lowering the tray to the floor, and he did not take his eyes from Ward. He rose then and turned as he heard groans from the other bunk.

„What's his trouble?“

Ward looked up. „Didn't your boss tell you?“

„He told me,” Cass said, „but I believe what I see.”

„Help yourself, then.“

Cass turned sharply. „You shut your mouth till I want to hear from you!“

„Yes, sir,” Ward said. His dark face was expressionless.

Cass stared at him, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. „You think you're somethin', don't you?“

Ward's head moved from side to side. „Not me.”

„I'd like to see you pull somethin',” Cass said. His right hand opened and closed, moving closer to his hip. „I'd just like to see you get off that bunk and pull somethin'.”

Ward shook his head. „Somebody's been telling you stories.”

„I think they have,” Cass said. He hesitated, then walked out, slamming the door shut.

Ward called to him through the bars, „What about the boy?“

„You take care of him,” Cass said, moving off. Hanley Miller followed, looking back over his shoulder.

Ward waited until the back door closed, then picked up a plate and began to eat and not until he was almost finished did he notice Given watching him.

„Did you see anything?“

Given came up on his elbow slowly. He looked at the tray on the floor, then at Ward. „Like what?“

„Like the way that deputy acted.“

„He wanted you to try something.“

„What else?“

Given pictured Cass again in his mind. „He was wearing a gun.” Suddenly he seemed to understand and he said, „The marshal wasn't wearing any, but this one was!”

Ward grinned. „And he knows you're sick. First his boss told him, then he saw it with his own eyes.” Ward put down the plate and he made a cigarette as he walked over to Given's bunk. „I'll tell you something else,” he said, standing close to the bunk. „I've been here seven days. For seven days I watch. I see the marshal. He knows what he's doing and he don't wear a gun when he comes in here. A man out in the hall with a scattergun's enough. Then this other one they call Cass. He walks like he can feel his gun on his hip. He's not used to it, but it feels good and he'd like an excuse to use it. He even wears it in here, though likely he's been told not to. What does that tell you? He's sure of himself, but he's not smart. He wants to see me try something—and he's sure he can get his gun out if I do. For seven days I see this and there's nothing I can do about it—until this morning.”

Given nodded thoughtfully, but said nothing.

„This morning I saw you,“ Ward went on, „and you looked sick. There it was.“

Given nodded again. „I guess I see.“

„We let the marshal know about it. He tells Cass when he comes on duty. Cass comes up and sure enough, you’re sick.“

„Yeah?“

„Then Cass comes up the next time—understand it’ll be dark outside by then: he brings supper up at six, but he must go out to eat after that because he doesn’t come back for the tray till almost eight—and he’s not surprised to see you even sicker.“

„How does he see that?“

„You scream like your stomach’s been pulled out and you roll off the bunk.“

„Then what?“

„Then you don’t have to do anything else.“

Given’s eyes held on Ward’s face. He swallowed and said, as evenly as he could, „Why should I help you escape?“ He saw it coming and he tried to roll away, but it was too late and Ward’s fist came down against his face like a mallet.

He was dazed and there was a stinging throbbing over the entire side of his face, but he was conscious of Ward leaning close to him and he heard the words clearly. „I’ll kill you. That reason enough?“

After that he was not conscious of time. His eyes were closed and for a while he dozed off. Then, when he opened his eyes, momentarily he could remember nothing and he was not even sure where he was, because he was thinking of nothing, only looking at the chipped and peeling adobe wall and feeling a strange numbness over the side of his face.

His hand was close to his face and his fingers moved to touch his cheekbone. The skin felt swollen hard and tight over the bone, and just touching it was painful. He thought then: Are you afraid for your own neck? Of course I am!

But it was more than fear that was making his heart beat faster. There was an anger inside of him. Anger adding excitement to the fear and he realized this, though not coolly, for he was thinking of Ward and Mary Ellen and himself as they came into his mind, not as he called them there.

Ward had said, Roll off the cot.

All right. He heard the back door open and instantly Ward muttered, „You awake?“ He turned his head to see Ward sitting on the edge of the bunk, his hands at his sides gripping the mattress. He heard the footsteps coming up the hall.

„I’m awake.“

„Soon as he opens the door,“ Ward said, and his shoulders seemed to relax.

As soon as he opens the door.

He heard Cass saying something and a key rattled in the lock. The squeak of the door hinges—

He groaned, bringing his knees up. His heart was pounding and a heat was over his face and he kept his eyes squeezed closed. He groaned again, louder this time, and doing it he rolled to his side, hesitated at the edge of the mattress, then let himself fall heavily to the floor.

„What’s the matter with him!“

Four steps on the plank floor vibrated in his ear. A hand took his shoulder and rolled him over. Opening his eyes, he saw Cass leaning over him.

Suddenly then, Cass started to rise, his eyes stretched open wide, and he twisted his body to turn. An arm came from behind hooking his throat, dragging him back, and a hand was jerking the revolver from its holster.

HANLEY MILLER tried to push away from the bars to bring up the shotgun. It clattered against the bars and on top of the sound came the deafening report of the revolver. Hanley doubled up and went to the floor, clutching his thigh.

Cass's mouth was open and he was trying to scream as the revolver flashed over his head and came down. The next moment Ward was throwing Cass's limp weight aside. Ward stumbled, clattering over the tray in the middle of the floor, almost tripping.

Given saw Ward go through the wide-open door. He glanced then at Hanley Miller lying on the floor. Then, looking at Ward's back, the thought stabbed suddenly, unexpectedly, in his mind—

Get him!

He hesitated, though the hesitation was in his mind and it was part of a moment. Then he was on his feet, moving quickly, silently, in his stocking feet, stooping to pick up the sawed-off shotgun, turning and seeing Ward near the door. Now Given was running down the hallway, now swinging open the door that had just closed behind Ward.

Ward was on the back-porch landing, starting down the stairs, and he wheeled, bringing up the revolver as the door opened, as he saw Pete Given on the landing, as he saw the stubby shotgun barrels swinging savagely in the dimness.

Ward fired hurriedly, wildly, the same moment the double barrels slashed against the side of his head. He screamed as he lost his balance and went down the stairway. At the bottom he tried to rise, groping momentarily, feverishly, for his gun. As he came to his feet, Pete Given was there—and again the shotgun cut viciously against his head. Ward went down, falling forward, and this time he did not move.

Given sat down on the bottom step, letting the shotgun slip from his fingers. A lantern was coming down the alley.

Boynton appeared in the circle of lantern light. He looked from Obie Ward to the boy, not speaking, but his eyes remained on Given until he stepped past him and went up the stairs.

A man stooped next to him, extending an already rolled cigarette.

„You look like you want a smoke.“

Given shook his head. „I'd swallow it.“

The man nodded toward Obie Ward. „You took him by yourself?“

„Yes, sir.“

„That must've been something to see.“

„I don't know—it happened so fast.“ In the crowd he heard Obie Ward's name over and over—someone asking if he was dead, a man bending over him saying no... someone asking, „Who's that boy?“ and someone answering, „I don't know, but he's got enough guts for everybody.“

Boynton appeared on the landing and called for someone to get the doctor. He came down and Given stood up to let him pass. The man who was holding the cigarette said, „John, this boy got Obie all by himself.“

Boynton was looking at Ward. „I see that.“

„More'n I would've done," the man said, shaking his head. „More'n most anybody would've done," Boynton answered. He looked at Given then, studying him openly. He said then, „I'll recommend to the judge we drop the charges against you."

Given nodded. „That'd be fine."

„Anxious to get home to your wife?"

„Yes, sir."

For a moment Boynton was silent. His expression was mild, but his eyes were fastened on Pete Given's face as if he were trying to read something there, some mark of character that would tell him about this boy.

„On second thought," Boynton said abruptly, „I'll tear your name right out of the record book, if you'll take a deputy job. You won't even have to put a foot in court."

Given looked up. „You mean that?"

„I got two jobs open," Boynton said. He hesitated before adding, „Look, it's up to you. Probably I'll tear your name out even if you don't take the job. Seeing the condition of Obie Ward, I wouldn't judge you're a man who's going to be pressured into anything."

Given's face showed surprise, but it was momentary, his mouth relaxing into a slow grin—almost as if the smile widened as Boynton's words sank into his mind—and he said, „I'll have to go to Dos Cabezas and get my wife."

Boynton nodded. „Will she be happy about this?"

Pete Given was still smiling. „Marshal, you and I probably couldn't realize how happy she'll be."

