

Darker Than You Wrote

by Mike Resnick

You lied, Jack.

Yeah, I know, you had to change his name to Will Barbee for legal reasons. I have no problem with that. And you embellished a little here and a little there. That's okay; it's what novelists do.

But you know what they say about Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* -- that every single sentence is true, but the book, taken as a whole, is a lie?

Same thing with *Darker Than You Think*.

You took Jacob Bratzinger -- I'm sorry: Will Barbee; whoever heard of a protagonist called Bratzinger? -- and romanticized the hell out of him. Made him some kind of hero. Even gave him a happy ending. You did all that just to make a sale.

Well, let me state just for the record that he wasn't romantic, and he was no hero, and, above all, he didn't end happily.

I know. I was there.

I'm sure shrinks hear a lot of strange stories during their working hours. So do fantasy editors and Hollywood producers, and any tourist who ever tries to walk past a beggar in a Third World city. But let me tell you, *nobody* hears as much out-and-out unbelievable bullshit as your friendly neighborhood bartender.

That's me.

I remember that Jake used to come around in the afternoons. A lonely drinker. Never had anyone with him, never tried to make friends with anyone once he got here. Stayed down at the far end of the bar and minded his own business. Always had an expression on his face that made you hope he was drinking to forget and that he'd succeed, because it looked like what he was remembering was pretty grim stuff.

He always left before sundown. Made no difference to me: I figured he worked a night shift. But then he started coming in all torn up, like he spent his nights prizefighting. Except that he wasn't black-and-blue, the way you'd expect him to be after a fight. No, sir, he was all ripped up, just like I said. He healed pretty fast, didn't bother going to the doctor except for some of the more serious wounds, never complained about the pain.

Since he usually showed up around two or maybe two-thirty, and he left before six, he and I spent a lot of time together with nobody else around, and finally, after maybe half a year, he loosened up and started telling me his story. I didn't believe it at first, but what the hell, it helped pass the time, so I dummied up and listened to him.

I gather that he was telling it to you at pretty much the same time, maybe in the mornings, and he kept waiting for your book to come out. He was sure some scientist would read about him and do something to cure him, though in retrospect I don't know what they could have done.

But then you crossed him up, Jack. You changed his name and gave him a girlfriend and passed it off as science fiction. You'll never know how close he came to killing you when *Darker Than You Think* came out.

Only one thing stopped him, and that was that he was sick of killing. You know, if he'd been a werewolf, if lycanthropy was all there was to it, if the old legends were right, I think he could have adjusted, I really do.

But you know that wasn't true, and you even told your readers. Jake didn't turn into a wolf. Not him. He was a tiger one day, and a roc -- you called him a pterosaur -- the next. He knew a girl -- he wasn't involved with her, he just happened to share a hunting ground -- named June (you called her April, remember?) who became a she-wolf at nights. And then there was Ben Sacks -- you wrote him out of the book completely -- who was a puma.

And even knowing all that, knowing that the flesh-eaters weren't confined to one kind of body, that they weren't all wolves or vampire bats or any of the other creatures out of legend, you still didn't see it, you never drew the connection.

But Jake learned it early on, and so did all of the others. He didn't shrivel in the sunlight like some bad Dracula movie, you know. He didn't instantly turn back into a man, either. It was a slow process, a gradual transformation, that took maybe ten or twelve minutes.

And during that time, he learned the awful, hideous truth, not about himself but about his world. Our world. For just as followers outnumber leaders and prey outnumber predators, so did those humans who turned into sheep and goats and cattle far outnumber Jake and his kind. It was presumptuous of him -- and you -- to think that only a handful of men and women underwent the Change at nights, or that those who changed all became nocturnal hunters.

Jake would make his kills, clean and swift, in the dead of night. He'd drag the carcasses to places of safety, where competing carnivores couldn't see or scent them. And then he'd dine on them, as he was meant to dine: tearing at their flesh, lapping up their blood, swallowing huge mouthfuls of meat. It was perfectly natural.

Until morning came, and the Change began, and it afflicted both predator and prey, and he'd find himself crouching over a half-eaten child, or a partially-consumed woman, and he realized how true was the old saying that you are what you eat, and he was once again a man.

He hated himself for it. His only hope was your book, and then you turned it into a novel, and after that he didn't have any hope at all. He started drinking more heavily, and the haunted look in his eyes grew worse and worse.

It only took another two weeks before he put a gun to his head, right there in the bar, and blew his brains out. Yeah, I know you hadn't heard, Jack; he asked me not to tell you.

That was, let me see, damned near half a century ago. Of course, I don't age the way normal men do. No reason why I should; I'm no more normal than Jake was. The Change just hit me a little later, that's all.

His very last wish was that I avenge him. It took me a long time to figure out what he meant. I mean, hell, he killed himself, so I could hardly take my vengeance out on him. And while it's true that the world made him what he was, I wouldn't begin to know how to destroy the world. So I thought about it, and thought about it, and finally I decided that he meant I should pay you a visit, Jack. He counted on that book of yours, and you let him down. I finally sold my business and retired last month, so now I'm ready to do what has to be done.

They tell me you're a pretty smart fellow, and that you're still working well into your eighties. That's good; I admire brains and industry. I figure you're probably a raccoon, or maybe a badger.

Me, I'm a wolverine. And unlike Jake Bratzinger, I don't have a problem with guilt at all. I like meat.

See you soon, Jack.

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