

X

The Stray Bullet

by Gary Brandner

There were plenty of empty stools in Leo's, it being the Monday after Easter, but the kid followed Hickman all the way to the end of the bar and sat down next to him. Normally, Hickman would not have minded having company, but on this Monday evening he was tired and would have preferred to sit alone.

The kid looked to be about twenty-two or twenty-three, and he needed a shave. Hickman shifted his stool a fraction of an inch farther away and concentrated on the glassy stare of the deer's head mounted behind the bar.

"Quiet night," the kid said.
"Yeah," Hickman grunted. He motioned to the bartender who was pulling on a red vest. "One of the usual, Leo."
The bartender dropped ice cubes into a squat glass and poured whiskey over them. He set the drink in front of Hickman and turned to the kid.

"What'll it be?"
"I'll have a glass of beer," the kid said.
"How about a sandwich, Mr. Hickman?" the bartender asked while he filled a glass from the beer tap.

"No, thanks, Leo. I'm trying to lose a few pounds."
The bartender patted his own stomach. "That's what I ought to do, but I'd rather be fat and happy than thin and miserable. As long as the girls don't complain, right?"
"Sure," said Hickman.

Leo picked up the money for the drinks and went down the bar to ring it up.
"This is my first trip to Los Angeles," the kid said. "I'm from Oregon."

"Nice state," Hickman said. "Green. Rains a lot, though."
The kid leaned over and peered intently into Hickman's face. "Look, do you mind if I tell you a story? I have to tell it to somebody all the way through just one time. If you're a hunter it should interest you. It's a story about a stray bullet."

Hickman studied the kid for a few moments. He was thin, almost frail, under the too-heavy checkered jacket. He had an unruly shock of brown hair and was overdue for a shave. His eyes had a pinched, hurting look.

"Okay," Hickman said, "Let's hear it."
The kid signaled for Leo to bring each of them another drink, and began to speak in a tight voice.

"My name is Wesley Mize. Last September I was married in Portland to a girl named Judy who I knew ever since we were in grade school. She was blonde and cute with sky-blue eyes the size of half dollars.

"For our honeymoon I took a week off from my job in a sporting goods store. We planned to just drive around our own state. On the second day we were headed out Highway 58 east of Eugene when Judy spotted an old logging road leading off into the woods. She was sure there would be wild blackberries, which she loved, up that way, so I turned off the highway and drove as far as I could before the brush got too thick.

"We got out of the car and, sure enough, wild blackberries were everywhere. Judy laughed and danced around like a little girl. She got a plastic bucket out of the car and ran ahead of me to fill it up with the berries.

She went running up on top of a little rise then, and she turned to wave for me to come on. She said, 'Hurry, Wes, come see what I found.'

"I started up to where she was waiting for me, but I never did see what she found. Just as I got to the rise where she was standing, a bullet went through her head and killed my wife of two days."

"Hey, that's terrible," Hickman said, feeling that he should say something.

"I just about went crazy," the kid went on. "I never heard the shot that killed her, but then there were three more in quick succession. I didn't see where they hit. I just started

running at the sound like I was chasing the devil. My foot got caught in some roots and I fell. It broke two bones in my right leg. Somehow, I don't know how, I must have crawled back to Judy's body, because that's where they found me in shock about six hours later. If a patrolman hadn't seen where our car turned off the highway and gone up to investigate, we might both still be there."

"That was lucky, anyway," Hickman said.

"Was it?" Wesley Mize let the question hang between them like smoke. "I spent the next five months in the hospital while they tried to fit my leg back together. There wasn't a single hour of those one hundred and forty-seven days that I didn't wish it was me who died instead of Judy."

"Couldn't the police tell anything about who fired the shots?"

"Not much. They knew it was a 30-06 deer rifle. An empty whiskey bottle was found where the shots came from. They guessed the guy was shooting at an old signpost where the logging road turned off. Just having a little target practice. He hit the post three times. His first shot was the stray that killed Judy. He never even knew he hit anybody. There was a screen of brush right there and you couldn't see to the road."

"That's really a tough break," Hickman said. "It's too bad you didn't at least get a look at the guy's car."

"Oh, but I did. I not only got a look at his car, I read the California license number, and I saw the man who did the shooting. I saw his fat drunken face as he threw the bottle out and drove away. He was weaving all over the road. Probably didn't remember a thing the next day. I was running after the car when I caught my foot and fell."

"Then why couldn't the police locate the man if you knew his license number and what he looked like?"

Wesley Mize stood up and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "I'll tell you the rest of the story when I get back," he said.

As the kid limped toward the Men's Room, Leo came over to Hickman and leaned on the bar.

"That guy's getting kind of loud," he said. "Is he giving you any trouble?"

"No, I think he's all right. He's all unstrung about

something that happened to his wife. I think he just wants to get the story off his chest."

"If he starts to get out of line give me the high sign. I heard him say he's from Oregon, and those people don't much like us Californians. For my money they can keep their state."

"It does rain a lot," said Hickman.

The kid came back and sat on his stool. Leo gave him a hard look and sidled away down the bar.

"The reason the police didn't catch the guy," the kid said, picking right up on his story, "is that I didn't tell them about seeing him."

"What would you do that for?" Hickman asked. "Didn't you want him punished?"

"That's exactly why I did it. I want him *punished*, not slapped on the wrist. As soft as the courts are these days, they would probably let him off with a suspended sentence. That man destroyed the most beautiful thing in my world. There is only one punishment for what he did. He's got to die."

"During those long months when I was in the hospital there was just one reason for me to live—so that I could come after the man who took my wife . . . and kill him."

"You mean you're going to try to find the guy yourself?"

"I mean I *have* found him. It was easy. I wrote to the California Department of Motor Vehicles and gave them the license number. They wrote back the name of the car's owner. It turned out he lives here in Los Angeles."

Hickman felt a sudden clutch of fear. "You have his address?"

"That's right. I went to his house today. I waited until I saw him come out to make sure he was the one, then I followed him right here to this very bar."

Hickman looked down and saw that the kid was holding a .45-caliber service automatic in his lap.

Wait a minute, son," Hickman cried, "you're making a mistake!"

"No mistake," the kid said.

As their voices rose, Leo came hurrying up the bar. When he reached the spot across from the seated men, Wesley Mize raised the big pistol and shot him in the face. Leo was

knocked back against the rows of bottles, then he pitched forward, smacking against the bar as he fell.

Hickman sat as though welded to the bar stool. Wesley Mize laid the automatic on the damp surface of the bar and pushed it toward him.

"I won't need this any more," the kid said. "The stray bullet is home now."

The End

"The Stray Bullet"

1. Where was Wesley Mize from?
2. What were Wesley and Judy celebrating when she was killed?
3. How was Judy killed?
4. What injuries did Wesley suffer?
5. What was the killer aiming for when he killed Judy?
6. What piece of evidence did Wesley have that he didn't tell the police about?
7. Why didn't he tell the police this information?
8. How did Wesley find his wife's killer?
9. Who was his wife's killer?
10. Why is this story called "The Stray Bullet"?