

# Oklahoma r e v i e w

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## Pretty to Think So

by Adam Berlin

The bullring was stone. This was where Jake Barnes brought Lady Brett. This was where Brett fell for Romero. This was where Hemingway concluded that bringing a woman to a bullfight was a dangerous thing, that she would see the *cojones* of the matador and forget the *cojones* of her man. Next to the ring was a large statue of Hemingway. Someone had tied a red kerchief around his neck. His face looked calm as he surveyed the streets of Pamplona.

My brother Danny and I had made up to meet at the cathedral. I checked the map, but there were no cathedrals listed by name as cathedrals, only a lot of churches. I asked three old men sitting on a bench where the biggest church was. They pointed across the city. I asked them the best day to see the bullfights and they all agreed the fourth day would be the best because the bulls that day were the bravest.

I walked to where the old men had pointed. The cobblestone streets became narrower and less crowded. I found the church, which looked like a cathedral even if it wasn't an official cathedral. Danny would find it. I leaned against the locked gate and drank from my bottle of sangria. Prayer was closed for the day. It seemed like everything that wasn't a bar was locked tight to protect it from the madness of San Fermin.

A cheer went up louder than the rest of the noise. I couldn't see what was going on from the church so I started walking. The late afternoon light was beautiful, clarifying the lines and edges of the buildings. I took the lens cap off my camera, took a photograph of an old man with a cane opening his door, put the lens cap on. Another cheer went up and I walked toward the

noise. I found a small square packed with people. The festival seemed to be farther along here. The people looked beyond happy drunk, their eyes slits, their voices hoarse, their beer muscles on. In the middle of the square was a statue, actually more a pillar of concrete and stone about twenty feet high and underneath the statue stood a group of ten men. A skinny kid with a New York Giants cap walked out from the crowd. Two guys gave him a push up and the kid started to climb the statue. The crowd became louder, focused. The kid got to the top, kneeled, balanced himself with his hands, looked down. The group of ten men formed two parallel lines at the bottom of the statue. They put out their arms and made a net of clasped hands and straightened forearms. The kid stood unsteadily, his hands now free. He looked down and smiled. Smiled because he was afraid and because there was a crowd cheering him to do something and because he was the center of attention and he probably wasn't used to that. The crowd became louder. The kid seemed to lose his balance, kneeled, held onto the top of the statue with his hand. The crowd cheered him on. The kid stood. He was still smiling. Then his mouth became hard. He seemed to be thinking, deciding something. Then he pushed off with legs still tense from hesitation. He dropped onto the row of arms under him. The ten men gave way under the weight of his fall and he hit the cobblestones. The kid stood. His smile was different now, triumphant. The crowd cheered. The kid's left arm hung at an awkward angle, broken.

I heard a couple of Americans talking behind me, rating the jump a 7.5. I turned around. They looked very drunk.

"Can I have a hit of your sangria, man," one of the Americans said. He had blond hair cut short, a small forehead.

I passed him my bottle.

"What is this?" I said.

"It's called the Muscle Bar or something," the taller American said. "They've been jumping for two hours. A couple of guys broke some ribs or something. One guy broke both his legs. You could literally hear them snap. The ambulance keeps going back and forth."

"Cool shit," the blond one said.

The kid with the busted arm walked past us.

"Good jump, man," the blond said.

The kid nodded. His mouth was clenched now. His eyes were glassy and sick looking. He held the bottom of his bad arm. I watched the kid walk through the square in search of some medical help.

"That dude's got balls," the blond guy said.

"Or no brains," I said.

"You think you got the balls to go up there?"

I looked at the small forehead, the pug nose, the flushed cheeks, the bloodshot eyes. I finished the bottle of sangria.

"Not yet," I said.

I walked to the other end of the square. Another guy was being helped up the statue. He looked like a Spanish Mike Tyson, big arms and shoulders, thick neck. He wore a T-shirt and white shorts, a red bandanna around his head, the costume colors of the festival. The crowd started to cheer. The Spanish guy got to the top of the statue. The ten men at the bottom clenched each other's arms, braced themselves for the weight of the next fall. The blond American yelled at the jumper to go for it. I took the cap off the lens and took a couple of shots. I would make sure to keep Danny away from here. Dan the Man. He had fought in the Golden Gloves. He rode a motorcycle on the Cross Bronx Expressway without a helmet. He defended the most seasoned criminals in pro-bono cases and went to their apartments in the worst neighborhoods to celebrate afterwards. Even as a kid I knew I wouldn't be able to catch up. He never called me on it, but when I met his friends, his coworkers, the women he dated, they looked at me and smiled a smile that I could easily read. Maybe it was true. Maybe I was no Danny. Maybe I didn't have the balls.

The Spanish guy fell forward. His body broke through the outstretched arms. His head hit the cobblestones. He stood. He smiled. His eye was cut, bleeding, and the side of his face was already starting to swell and the crowd was cheering.

I left the square, bought a fresh bottle of sangria and walked the streets. The bars overflowed. Music blared. A parade passed by, the dancing crowd chanting *Oh way-Ohwayohwayohway-Oh way-Oh way*. Huge figures, grotesque-featured faces with long bodies held up by poles, moved through the street. I went into one of the bars on the main square, a place Papa himself might have visited, and ordered a vodka. I looked at the faces along the bar. One woman took my focus. Short brown hair brushed back Lady Brett-style, high cheekbones, full mouth. She sipped at a glass of red wine, listened to the man next to her. I stayed on her until she looked at me. I stayed with her eyes and she looked away, then back to see if I was still looking and I was. I drank up. A couple in the corner kissed a kiss worthy of a Doisneau photograph. The vodka was hitting me, pushing the warmth of the sangria up into my head. The man next to Lady Brett walked away and the vodka helped me move through the bar to the woman with the short brown hair.

"You speak English?" I said.

"I hope so," she said.

"You're English."

"Well done," she said.

"You even sound like Lady Brett."

"Who is Lady Brett?"

"Are you serious?"

"Are you?"

"Do you like Hemingway?"

"I never read him."

"There's a character named Lady Brett in one of his books. *The Sun Also Rises*. It's why Pamplona is so famous."

"And she looks like me?"

"She's beautiful like you."

"Well then. Thank you for the compliment."

"Was that your friend?"

"He's my husband."

I looked at her finger and there was the ring.

*"Isn't it pretty to think so?"*

"What?"

"It's a line. You never heard of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*?"

"I've heard of it," she said. "I've just never read it."

I walked out of the bar.

Jake Barnes had been disappointed too. And his last line was my favorite line. Just the right amount of sentiment without being sentimental, just enough toughness to make it sad. The tip of the iceberg Hemingway would say. The subtext the key. Lady Brett sitting next to Jake in all her sexual beauty, Jake looking at her, wishing he can have her, knowing he can never have her, knowing his balls have been shot off in the war, knowing that to have Lady Brett is impossible and especially impossible for him. *Isn't it pretty to think so?* Jake's quiet line so simple, so full of awful acceptance, but also full of dignity. Hemingway's men were men.

I kept drinking, bar after bar after bar. I remember a young woman telling me to fuck off in an Australian accent. I remember shooting vodka with a guy from Norway. I remember talking to a Spanish guy about running with the bulls, how he said I shouldn't run if I didn't know what I was doing and if I was too hung over. I remember buying a hamburger at an outdoor grill, eating it, going back for more. I remember walking back to the hotel, the city less crowded, the streets filthy, all mud and paper and broken glass, smelling like spilled beer and piss, bodies passed out against buildings, the morning blue streaked with gray. I remember falling into bed. I remember walking to the hallway bathroom, sticking my finger down my throat, looking at my bloodshot eyes in the mirror before I forced myself to puke some more.

I woke with the sun in my eyes. Music was playing outside. I stood up to lower the shades. My head hurt. I chewed some stale bread left over from France. Dry bread in my dry mouth. I showered and went down to walk off the hangover. Through the square. To the

bullring. Around the bullring to the Hemingway statue. The red kerchief was still around Hemingway's neck and someone had added a red bandanna. I pictured Jake nursing his hangover in a nearby bar, waiting for Brett to show so he could take her around, introduce her to the festival, not heeding his own advice about bringing a woman to the bullfights, and then she'd meet the matador Romero and then, at least in Jake's mind, it wouldn't matter if Jake had balls or not.

In New York, the night before I left, I met Danny in a bar and we talked about Pamplona. I told Danny to read some Hemingway before the trip. He said he would if he had time. He got very drunk that night. Danny said he'd start running to be ready for the bulls. I said we weren't necessarily running. He laughed at that and said we'd see. He bought round after round. He drank to my trip. To our meeting in Pamplona. To a break from work. Danny looked at me, one drink too many making him pause, and he told me not to judge him. He hated that he'd become a corporate lawyer, the easiest way to make easy money. Who was I to judge? Waiting tables. Telemarketing magazine subscriptions. Working temp jobs. Just so I'd have time to take photographs and develop them in the dark room. Sometimes I'd sleep late since getting up wasn't worth it, the day of petty work ahead too daunting. When I was able to devote a full day to my photographs I'd feel good. But these days weren't consistent. Who was I to judge? Danny bought another round, told me to stick with my art, me hating that word. I was no artist. Not a real artist. Not yet. I had never been exhibited. Danny always told me I had what it took. And he always stuck up for me, his kid brother, even when I was too old to be stuck up for. Only a year before, a drunk frat boy had me against the wall in the Corner Bistro and Danny came over. A punch to the kidney to turn the frat boy around, a left hook to the chin to put him down. Danny even finished the frat boy's beer and set it on the bar before we walked out.

I saw the top of the big church, checked my watch, slowed my pace. Danny was looking forward to his two-week break. I had been to his office once. I'd just picked up a check from *New York Magazine* for a photograph they'd used. The photograph was of a blown manhole cover, a lucky shot, a shot I just happened to be there for. I heard an explosion while I was

taking another photograph. I turned to the sound with the auto-drive still going and there was the manhole cover in midair, a cushion of hot steam underneath making the disc look safe and not the deadly projectile it was. In the background is a man in a suit, ducking, his briefcase out in front of him like a frivolous shield. To celebrate my first sale, Danny told me to stop by the office so he could take me out. The other lawyers were interested in seeing me, Danny's brother, Dan the Man's bro. There were a lot of overly firm handshakes. A lot of bullshit camaraderie. A lot of suits and ties. I think all the young lawyers expected me to be as charming as Danny was. Danny was the jock, the ladies' man, the student everyone loved because he did his work and still went to all the parties. He was a golden boy with dark hair who was comfortable everywhere, who made every room his own, who always took the focus. Sometimes even I couldn't tell that he was trying. He made it look that easy.

I stopped at the Muscle Bar. A Nordic-looking guy in shorts and no shirt stood on top of the statue ready to jump. I looked over the crowd. I saw the dark hair, the wide back, the perfect posture, the half-finished bottle of sangria that Danny was holding. The guy jumped onto the outstretched arms, but for me the jump was just background. I walked to Danny. The jumper limped away. I asked Danny if he knew where the cathedral was. Danny turned around. We grabbed each other. Five weeks of traveling alone was over.

"Man," he said. "Good to see you. Look at this place."

"How long have you been here?" I said.

"The plane made good time. I was here around eleven."

Danny looked at his bottle.

"This sweet stuff grows on you," he said.

Danny handed me the sangria and I took two long swigs. I gave him back the bottle. He didn't look tired at all. His eyes were clear.

"How was the trip?" he said. "Did you do all that on-the-road stuff? Did you get a lot of great pictures? You don't look any worse for wear."

"The trip's been good."

"So this is Pamplona," Danny said. "It's some party."

"Not for the guys jumping."

Danny looked back at the statue. There were no new comers, no one to keep the crowd's attention.

"I found a hotel room," I said.

"Good man. Let's dump my bag and we'll see what San Fermin has to offer."

I picked up Danny's bag and we walked the crowded streets back to the hotel. He stopped in a store and bought two bottles of sangria, opened them, handed one to me. I felt like telling him to slow down, that the festival lasted a good week, but he was on vacation and he seemed happy. Danny looked all around, making Pamplona his own. I tried to look at the city through Danny's eyes. The women were suddenly more beautiful, more available. The festival more full of possibility. A woman pulled at Danny's arm and he joined a circle of dancers, moved into the middle, danced wildly, low to the ground, kicking his legs out, then jumping higher than the crowd, sangria spilling. The woman kissed him on the mouth. I held Danny's bag and waited.

"Nothing to do for two weeks," Danny said when he came over. "Just you and me and whatever happens."

He finished his sangria with four long swallows and we walked the rest of the way to the hotel.

Danny showered. I looked out the window at the crowd below, a repeat performance of last night only Danny was here. Danny came back, towel around his waist. He opened his bag and gave me a pair of white pants, a new white T-shirt, a red sash and a red bandanna. He had the same outfit for himself. Danny said he'd done his research.

"O/e," he said, standing naked, towel as cape in front of him. He flared the cape, stuck out his lower lip as he watched an imaginary bull pass under him. "I read that Hemingway story where those two kids are horsing around like this. The one kid wants to be a matador and asks his friend to attach butcher knives to a chair and pretend he's the bull."

"The matador kid ends up getting stabbed to death by mistake. I liked that story."

"It was a story," Danny said.

In our white and red we went down to the streets. I left my camera in the room. Music blared from the bars. People sang. *Oh way-Ohwayohwayohway-Oh way Oh way*. Danny bought two bottles of sangria and handed me one. A girl grabbed Danny and they started to dance. He pointed to me and the girl ran over, pulled me into the circle. Danny moved past me, dancing wildly, passing his bottle of sangria around, extending the line of dancers, grabbing at hands from other lines, forming a bigger and bigger circle, the life of the party at this biggest of parties.

"Who's your friend?" the girl I danced with said, out of breath. She was American.

"He's my brother."

"He's a wild man."

A band started to play in the center of the square. We danced on but the beat felt too slow. Danny broke from the circle. I followed him. Sweaty, breathing hard, we walked the streets. I heard a siren in the background. We found a place cooking sausage sandwiches and Danny bought two for each of us and two fresh bottles of sangria. We sat on the curb to eat. Danny asked me about where I'd been, what people I'd met, what pictures I'd taken. He said he was sure some of my European shots would get me a show somewhere. The parade with the tall figures passed by, the oversized heads bobbing to the music, painted mouths looking angry or shocked or grinning with maniacal happiness. The men controlling the figures kicked empty bottles out of their path.

We went into a bar. Danny asked what I wanted. I said I was pretty drunk. He ordered two shots of vodka. Danny drank his down and ordered another. He leaned against the bar, staring at the bottles on the other side.

"There's this guy in my office that ran with the bulls," Danny said. "This little guy named Ardsley. He's actually James Ryan Ardsley the Third. But he's Ardsley to me. I can't stand the fucker. He's always kissing ass. He talks about running with the bulls whenever he can and there are pictures of Pamplona all over his office wall and a set of bullhorns on his desk. Every

chance he gets he talks about the run. When I get back to work, I'm going to tell everyone it was no big deal."

"Maybe it is a big deal."

"Believe me. If Ardsley did it, it's no big deal."

"Maybe he didn't really run with them. Maybe he just waited for them to pass, or started so far ahead they never came near him. We don't have to run anyway."

"You want another shot?"

"No."

"Those guys jumping today. No way to bullshit out of that. You either jump or you don't. I spoke to one guy. He said every year a couple of guys split their heads open. Dead. Like that." Danny snapped his fingers.

"They're fools."

Danny looked around the bar.

"Can you imagine being their parents?" I said. "Getting a call from the Pamplona police. *Hey, Mr. Jones. Your son jumped off a statue and cracked his skull open. He enjoyed the festival though. Stupid kids.*"

"They jumped."

"Peer pressure. They do it for the crowd. For all those assholes cheering them on."

"Not when you're up there. It's you against you."

"I don't know. It's stupid. It's a waste."

Danny's eyes were still clear. He could drink all day and all night. I'd never seen him go down.

"A waste of what?" he said.

Danny held my eyes. He could tell I was drunk. I was sure of that.

"What?" I said.

"A waste of what?"

"A waste of life," I said.

Danny looked back across the bar.

"You want another shot?" he said.

"No."

"It's all shit, anyway."

"What's all shit?"

"All of it. I can already see where this thing's going."

"Just enjoy it."

"Half the people here are just here so they can go home and tell everyone what a great time they had at the festival. Saying San Fermin like they were raised in Spain. With a fucking accent. *San Fermin*. I read some of your Hemingway."

"He's not my Hemingway."

"I read about him. He sounds as full of shit as Ardsley."

I forced myself to make my words clear, sober.

"The man and his work should not be judged together," I said.

Danny looked at me.

"You're the artist, not me," he said.

"You know I don't use that word."

"No. You don't. But he was full of shit. He wrote macho to make up for his own shortcomings. His mom dressed him up like a little girl when he was a child."

"That wasn't his fault."

"There were other things. I read how he used to spar with Gene Tunney. Hemingway was acting like he had a shot. Like he could hurt a professional fighter. It pissed Tunney off how cocky Hemingway was getting. So Tunney threw a punch with all his weight behind it. A real punch and not a bullshit punch like he usually threw at his writer friend. He purposely missed, but Hemingway heard it whistle. He heard the real power of a real punch. And he got out of the ring."

"So he wasn't a fighter."

"I read about a hunting trip he went on where his buddy shot a bigger something with bigger horns. Hemingway was morose the rest of the trip. Like a spoiled little kid."

"I see you've done your research."

"I just did some reading. You told me to do some reading. Did you know that a matador gets fucked before he gets in the ring?"

"I know."

"That way his balls have nothing to do with it. Hemingway never learned that lesson."

"His books are more than that. You just have to look under the words."

"Whatever. You want another shot?" Danny said.

"No."

"Let's go see if anyone's jumping."

"Let's go somewhere else."

"I want to go there. Then we'll go out."

I looked at Danny's eyes. They weren't glazed at all.

"Come on," he said.

I walked with Danny. It was getting dark, the sky a different blue from morning, the streaks of clouds almost black. The streets were packed. Music blared. People danced. Bottles lined the curbs. Men sat passed out against building walls, too drunk to lie down even. We heard the cheers before we got there. The square was packed. A man in his forties, thin and tall, waved to the crowd and walked back to his friends. He bled from a cut on his forehead. The crowd cheered. I saw the two Americans. The blond guy with the small forehead was yelling for more.

I followed Danny to the front of the crowd. He crouched and looked up. It seemed to get quiet around him. I looked at the statue through his eyes, then stopped. I didn't like what he was seeing.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

"How high would you say that was?"

"It's high enough to kill you if you fall wrong. It's just macho shit."

"Did your buddy Hemingway ever do this?"

"I don't know."

"Did he even write about it?"

"I don't know. Maybe they weren't doing this in the 20s."

*"Isn't it pretty to think so?"* he said.

Danny stood up. I watched his legs stretch straight, his white pants spotted with mud. I looked at my own white pants. Mud, dirt, wine. I wanted to get my camera and photograph the crowd of white pants stained from the festival.

"Let's go," I said.

"My eyes," Danny said. "They're clear."

I didn't say anything.

"They're clear, right? You know they are."

Dan the man. I always thought he put on a show for others, but maybe I was wrong. There was no one here who mattered, no one who knew him and I didn't think he'd bother putting on a show for me.

"They're clear," I said.

"I know. I've checked them in the mirror when I feel like this."

He was drunk, but he knew he was on to something.

I forced myself to talk straight, to think straight. He was my brother.

"Let's just get out of here, Danny. Come on. You just got here. You just got to Spain. You're on vacation. Let's just have a good time."

People started cheering. A man walked past us and was helped up the statue. Red-faced. Built solid. He was laughing. He finished his bottle and dropped it to the ground. The glass smashed. He got to the top and the crowd cheered. I looked at Danny. His eyes were clear. The ten men at the bottom clasped hands.

The guy fell wrong. He dropped a bit to the side. The sound his head made on the cobblestones was more thick than sharp, not so much a cracking of bone but a pressing in. Blood started to fill the spaces between the cobblestones. The crowd was quiet. The ten men unclasped their hands. Some of them surrounded him. Then the noise started again, first just conversations and then people seemed to forget about the body, started passing their bottles around. The ambulance came. Two paramedics put the dead guy on a stretcher and put him in the ambulance. The siren was loud, but there was no reason to put the siren on.

"I'm next," Danny said.

"Don't be stupid."

"The one after the one that split his head open. That sobers you up."

"Let's just go."

"I'm here."

Danny drank down his bottle of sangria.

"I'm not like Hemingway," he said.

His voice was quiet. The subtext was clear. If I hadn't been next to him, he wouldn't have spoken at all. I had to think sober, had to struggle to come up with something. My voice was too loud, but I didn't care.

"You're not jumping. This means nothing to you. It's shit. It's macho shit. You're not going to prove shit."

"I'm just going to do it. Just for me. I won't even tell Ardsley, that fucking fake."

"And what happens if you split your head open?"

"I'll be dead."

"Great. Easy come, easy go. What do I tell Mom and Dad? That you were searching for some sort of bullshit realization up there on the statue?"

"I had my bullshit realizations a long time ago."

"I'm very impressed."

"Are you done?"

"Do I call or write them a postcard? *Dear Mom and Dad. Having a wonderful time in Spain. Guess what? Danny did it again. He showed he's the better man than I am.*"

"Is that it?"

"What?"

"Is that it?"

I didn't say anything.

"This won't make me more of a man than you. It takes real guts to do what you're doing. Chances are you'll never make it, but you keep trying. You're doing what you want to do. You don't need to jump. I'm jealous of you."

"I'm not doing what I want to do," I said.

"At least you're still trying."

Danny started to walk to the statue. I grabbed him from behind. He turned around, pushed my arm away. His eyes were clearer than my eyes. He was calm, waiting for me to make the move so he could counter it. I could never take him and I was too drunk to even slow him down. Danny turned back to the statue. The crowd started to cheer. I watched him walk. Danny pulled himself to the top of the statue, his arms looking mighty, full of blood. He balanced himself. The ten men on the ground formed two lines, clasped each other's hands.

I forced myself to watch. And I watched quietly. Maybe that was my macho coming through or maybe I was forcing myself to put a distance on him, to truly not judge.

My brother fell forward. No hesitation. He just let himself drop.

We walked out of the square. He pressed his white shirt against his bloody mouth. The parade of tall figures moved past us. The men controlling the figures walked slowly, kicking bottles out of their path. The ambulance siren was far away now, taken over by the crowd, the crowd drinking, the crowd dancing, the crowd singing. *Oh way-Ohwayohwayohway-Oh way-Oh way.*

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