



Talk with Jake Yarbrough, a living memory of a taken father*

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, 2013

* Title chosen by Jake

May to July 2013:

Jake, a couple days ago, on May 24th, I received an e-mail to the contact address of my pen pal Robert Pruett's homepage. He doesn't have access to a computer and so I forward the incoming messages to him.

I read what you wrote and I immediately recognized your name: You are the son of a man who was stabbed to death by Robert's father and supposedly by his two sons, one being Robert. For that, Robert was sentenced to 99 years at the age of barely 16. Only later, at the age of 20, he received the death penalty for another - equally contested - case inside the prison. Your e-mail was very long and very bitter. At the end of your message you wrote: This will be my one and only attempt to say anything to you.

What made you write that message?

Yes, indeed I am Jake Yarbrough, the only son of Brondell Raymond Yarbrough.

I've been a friend of Robert's for the past 11 years. What goes through your mind when you hear that?

Well the first thought that comes to mind is "mislead".

It's easy to paint someone a picture of yourself if you can't see them or know what they have done.

I would think in the past 11 years you came up with every little part of his life leading up to him killing someone.

There would be some sort of answer to give people besides "unfortunate turn of events" or "it wasn't me". In Robert's case none of his words hold any value as he is painting a picture of someone he wants to go back to or be. Not what he is.

I hear a lot of pride in your statement whose son you are.

I think we should focus on two topics in this interview: On your connection to Robert and on your connection to your father.

Can you imagine that you and I talking could result in something positive?

I could see this resulting in drama to be honest. Last thing I need. Am I worried or will it stop me from helping you with this article, no.

I hope that somehow, it might result in Robert giving a true last admission guilt and going off this planet in peace knowing he put it all out there.

I mean I sometimes place myself in his shoes, how screwed up that may sound, but I tell myself why, why would I act like my life is something to spare knowing I took another humans life with my bare hands? I wouldn't.

I would aim at a “clean slate” to work with in an afterlife knowing I put it all out there before I left this world.

You say you hope that Robert Pruett will admit guilt where he says he’s not guilty... I wonder what the background of your hope is. Contempt for what you think is a gutless behavior or care about him having a “clean slate” when he dies?

That is a small hope that I have in Robert as well. Maybe something will break loose and let your soul free of all its shadows so that maybe in some way or form a God can see him for who he really is. Not the image he wants.

After some real thought over the matter:

One, being that his time left to put everything out on the table is coming to a very close end.

Two, if I was to ignore his attempt to be truthful to himself before he is forever damned, would be wrong.

In the meantime you have received an answer to your letter from Robert. I allow myself to quote some of what you wrote in your most recent response to him, as our talk seems to base on the letters you write to Robert and that I forward to him.

In a clear statement you wrote in your letter to Robert “Not going to attempt to say I don’t have a lot of hate towards you”.

It is something in particular that you long to hear from Robert and anything else that he writes doesn’t soothe your anger.

At the same time you write that there is nothing Robert could say to fill the hole he had left in your soul. I wonder, isn’t that a no-win situation?

I think me saying clearly there is some hate behind my current feeling towards Robert and his family did not close off any possible paths of a clear soul and mind one day.

The anger just clouds the real human emotions, like pain, loss, anguish.

Robert’s words cannot ever undo what has been done. There is a point in life though when things change, cards are dealt different. Cards can be changed to alter the end of the game.

In Robert’s case I do think he has all the cards he needs to put out on the table and at the end of it could consider himself a different man. Not so much a cold blooded killer, but an open book to the real person he is inside. It is possible.

Several times you mentioned your grandfather, who lost his son Ray Yarbrough to that horrible stabbing. I can hear that you love your grandfather and care about him. You describe how devastated he still is over the loss of his son.

About your grandfather you wrote: “He truly does believe that God let him know his son is with him, and is watching over him. And asked him to let the pain go, just let it go.”

Did this help your grandfather to cut the bond to Robert and to show “empathy and forgiveness” in a letter to him years ago?

I do love my grandfather very much and I'm proud to say that's my grandpa. Through all the ups and downs and heart ache and loss and to still be one strong willed man as he is should be an example of a good willed human empathy I think God reaching back to him and letting him calm his heart not only let him let go of some pain but actually saved his life.

There are two things that seem to bring some light and hope into the dark and desperate story. First that you believe that there is something "beyond this life span" and second that you wrote "But I will do my best to always have a clear picture of the man my father actually was and was trying to be before he died."

Yes I do believe those are two major points to have actually accomplished a success story in some way.

Fact there is another world besides this one we go to when we die. How we chose to live and leave is who gets in.

And I do want to collect as much information as possible about my father, good, bad or possibly false.

It will hopefully add to something more then what I knew before I emailed you about sending Robert a letter.

We don't know whether or not Robert will act the way you need it for your own feeling of accomplishment.

It seems all to be in Robert's hands now.

Jake, in your first answer you wrote the nickname of your father. You now asked me to change that and write his real name Brondell Raymond Yarbrough.

That, to me, is the sign that we should now turn to talking about him.

When you mentioned your grandfather's memories of your father you wrote:

"I don't know which is worse: Me not having any memory of him to really miss and think about. Or my grandfather having the memories to always miss and think about."

How would you describe your father?

I would describe my father as a very stand up person. When he speaks, it's something to hear. I have been told I not only carry all of his behavior but walk and talk in the same way. It's not hard to believe when you look at his teenage pictures and him growing as a young adult.

I knew he loved me very much.

Jake, in our e-mails, you and I are now talking about probably meeting this summer when I come to the USA. What would your father say to such a meeting?

I think my father would say go for it, tread carefully never know peoples' motives.

Right when we started talking about your father you wrote to me that it was Father's Day in the USA and that you were going to call your grandfather. I thought that was a very beautiful coincidence..... !

Beginning of August 2013:

Jake, it's August 1st now – your birthday! – and you and I are meeting right now outside Atlanta, where you live, drinking coffee.

This interview that we started months ago kind of goes wild, we write, stop, talk on the phone, write, stop, talk on the phone and now even sit face to face and go on writing this talk on the laptop. ☺

Through me, you've also exchanged a couple messages with Robert. (For offenders and victim's family members it's prohibited to write directly without going through an official proceeding.)

This is Jake Yarbrough at Ruby Tuesdays'. I'm glad I finally got to meet my new friends from overseas and speak up front.

As we sat and had great small talk we got towards the idea of trying to set up a direct contact between me and Robert.

I'm glad that you built a strong friendship with someone for so long and understand that you had a clean slate to work with.

I explained my side of the story and how my slate did not start off so clean. Do you see that for me it would be somewhat complicated to be as close to Robert as you are?

I can of course see that you won't ever have the same relationship with Robert as I do. This is not necessary, though. Hm. I guess my point is that I imagine you would find many similarities between Robert and you, besides the one big difference that he's in prison and you are free. Somehow I hope communication between Robert and you would make your life richer and wholer.

Was it long before you seen me walking towards you before you had the idea I could be the son of such a great man that's no longer with us on this earth?

I like this question! ☺ Fact is I immediately knew it was you when I saw you walking towards us because you were kind of indicating you had "a reason to be there" as you put it. I don't have a clear picture of your father though except that I know you love him and that he had a horrible death.

Did you think that the way I have grown and look fits the personality or talks we have had?

Again, I didn't have a clear picture of you but after I saw you I knew you were how Jake Yarbrough should be.

Nice that you called us "friends" although we still think very differently about my friend Robert's fate. You still think he deserves the death penalty while I don't.

You said that there was one big difference between me and Robert but that you would hope we could bring our lives closer together.

I ask you do you see that there is a lot more than the fact of Robert's freedom and my freedom: I didn't take part in taking something he dearly loved and needed growing up on this earth. Does the knowledge of his actions hold no bearing?

You see we have different views on Robert's fate. Did you not know he did something at the beginning of your pen pal-ship that put him in such a decided and chosen fate by his actions?

Yes, I see all of this. That's why Robert is where he is. However, there are several versions with key differences about who was involved in the murder.

I know that the past has consequences in the present, how could I not? Maybe you misunderstood me. I just think that the present is the only time we can influence. I lost my own father at the same age as you did, although not through murder but through a heart attack. Yes, it still does affect my present. I know it firsthand.

Whatever Robert did or did not do has never had any influence on my decision to write to him. I received his address through lifespark. lifespark arranges pen pal-ships to inmates on death row. I didn't choose Robert; - I was given his address.

I have a lot of understanding for your point of view. I guess you would disagree?

What, according to you, am I still missing?

I think you got lot of heart towards human interaction and loss.

But I also think that you have come to realize that there is so much that has happened in the past that it is impossible that you can help two lives not have so much turmoil.

Is there any crime towards another human that would prevent you from trying to build a friendship with the offender?

During the years that I've been writing to death row inmates I have found answers to questions like the one you just posed. Today, I answer your question with no. You see, the inmates on our lifespark's waiting list all requested a pen pal, so they want human interaction. That is a prerequisite for me. I'm willing to deal with what they tell me and to consider it something that is in the range of possible human behavior. I'm ready to face the challenge that goes with it.

End of August 2013:

Jake, meeting you and later on also your grandfather in the area of Atlanta was impressive and important to me. I kind of "crossed the bridge" and met with people who favor the death penalty and who want my friend Robert dead as soon as possible.

Thank you for being so open to me. This interview represents the different phases we've had since we first got in contact. We've made quite some way already, haven't we?

I hope we go on discussing, however, this talk stops here.

I wish you all the best, Jake!