

Roy's Round Top Saloon and Dance Hall

Roy's Round Top Saloon and Dance Hall was known for many things. It was where Billy Jo Tyler got drunk off of two tequila shots and a Lone Star, then punched his cousin Jimmy so hard his nose healed sideways. It was where Christie Ann Gocke got knocked up by that one Luther boy after the tenth grade Independence Day dance. In 1996, it was where George W Bush stopped to get a Bud on his way back to Austin. It was also where some drug lord from Houston was caught on Cops, and the episode played for months on end in the town visitor center. Most importantly, when Roy closed the red barn door every morning at 2:30 am, it was where the ghosts of Round Top went to forget about life for a while.

"Ey! Roy!" Danny Hendrichs stumbled through the wall, laughing hard enough to shake the pigeons nesting in the rafters. Danny had died in drunk-driving accident the night he turned seventeen back in 1972, and never forgot to remind Roy that the one good thing about his death was that he could now drink and drink and drink and never crash another '66 'Stang. "Grab me a Bud, would ya?"

Roy looked up from behind the counter, his thick white mustache curling up with his lips into a smile. "Evenin', Danny." He grabbed a bottle from the fridge under the counter, uncapped it and slid it over to the semi-corporeal kid. "Ain't you a little young to be drinkin' so hard? Yer' in here every night."

Danny narrowed his eyes at the old man. "I done died forty years ago, Roy. Ain't nobody care 'bout no drinkin' age back then." He tipped the bottle back, the liquid disappearing somewhere in his hazy form. "Ain't nobody care 'bout no drinkin' age when yer' dead."

Roy laughed as he moved from behind the counter to the stereo system at least as old as Danny's ghost. He popped in a mixed tape one of the girls had made him after old Ten-Thumbs had broken half his cassette collection in an attempt to DJ one night. As soon as the twang of a banjo blasted statically from the one working speaker, he turned back to the barn room with a smile. At least ten more ghosts had gathered, all dressed in their Sunday best, ready for another raucous night in Roy's domain. The ghosts were his court, and, in the flaking red barn out off Old 36, Roy was king.

"Yoohoo!" Suzanna Miller was an old belle from Georgia who died when her horse threw her off one cold morning two Decembers ago. She had always been pretty, even as she got old, and faded. Now, her iridescent wrinkles and silvery wisps of hair were truly ethereal, and, in the afterlife, she was the fancy hairpin in the haystack. She waltzed into the bar and owned it. All ghostly eyes were suddenly on her. "How're all y'all, my favorite lil' bar?"

The edges of Roy's lips curled up into a wide smile, and he lifted up his black-felt Stetson to smooth down his thinning yellow hair. "Good evenin', Miss Suzanna," he said, taking his place behind the bar and pulling out a painted julep cup he kept separate, just for her. "And might I just say yer lookin' mighty fine t'night?"

"Oh, Roy," she said, smiling so wide he could see straight through the back of her mouth to the drunken, dancing specter of a cop behind her. "You always know just how to make a girl feel so pretty." She settled her chin into one of her hands, and tapped the other against the bar counter.

Roy settled his hat back onto his head, twisting it on until it fit just right over his bald spot. "That's 'cause ye are, Miss—"

"Roy!" Suzanna's eyes grew wide, and she leaned forward on the wooden bar stool to pluck the cowboy hat from his head. "Look at this." She fingered the feathering string of the braided band that lined the outside of the crown. Holding it out to him, she pointed to where the felt had worn away at the back to show the smooth, shiny interior. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Roy Jenkins. Lettin' this nice hat go to you-know-where like this." She set the hat back on the counter as he poured a healthy helping of bourbon into her cup. "Listen, from one friendly neighbuh' to anotheuh', Mr. Miller left a fair amount of cash buried up by the lake when he moved on a few years back. Now," she leaned in real close and whispered to him, "I'd be willin' to get it for you, if you want." Suzanna brushed her ghostly fingers along his cheek, and the feeling of her cold almost-touch made Roy's stomach roil with over-excited butterflies. "And maybe we could get you a new hat, hmm?"

Roy blushed deeply, settling his hat back onto his head and leaning so close to Suzanna that, were she anything but a ghost, their noses would have touched. "Aw, shucks, Miss Suzanna." He plucked a few of the mint leaves he kept under the bar,

sprinkling them into her cup. Roy pushed the drink toward her and leaned onto his forearms. "Yer' always so kind. Always were. You'll drive a man to sinnin' with that talk o' yers—"

"Oh, Roy," Suzanna said, shooing him off with her hand before taking a small, polite sip of her mint julep. "You know I'm just being friendly."

He took off his hat and held it to his heart, which was fluttering faster than a hummingbird's wings in his chest. Roy moved to set his hand on top of hers, but was careful not to let them touch. His hand would have gone straight through hers to rest on the wood of the bar, and that would have been uncomfortable for them both. The ghosts didn't like to be reminded they were no longer corporeal, and Roy never did enjoy the feeling of his skin going through the ether. It felt as if he was sticking his hand through the slime in the sewers, and it made goosebumps form along his arms and legs. "Listen, Miss Suzanna," he said, smiling down at her with his wide, nearly toothless grin. "I never did get a chance to tell ya' this when you were alive, but, really, I wanted to say that I admire you." He leaned in real close, like he would have if she were still alive and he could really kiss her. "I always did. And, if it weren't fer my wife and ol' Mr. Miller, oh, honey, I would have snatched you up long ago."

"Roy Millhouse Jenkins, you have some 'splainin' to do, you son of a bitch!"

The entire room turned to the intruder, and the sight of Mrs. Lou Jenkins' translucent form had Roy instantly quaking in his boots. "Lou!"

"Roy Jenkins, who do you think you are?" She floated over to him, pointing her finger straight between his eyes, making him shrink back and knock into the glasses of whiskey and gin that . "Every night, Roy, you come back so late the cocks are crowin', and now I find that yer serving these damn dead people? What kind of husband lies to his *wife* like that?"

Roy's eyes ran up and down her form, his tongue barely able to form words as it grew hot and dry. He licked his lips quickly and sputtered out, "But—but Lou! Yer dead!"

"Yeah, I'm dead, you two-faced ass! And already yer gettin' with some lowlife hussie!"

Suzanna stood quickly, slapping her hand against the counter. “Now listen here, you small-town sow, I am a gently-bred lady of much finer quality than you—” she scanned down Lou’s form and sneered “—could ever dream of becomin’.”

Lou’s eyes smoldered a deep, angry red when she turned back to Roy. “Not only did you lie, but yer cheatin’ on me with a goddamn Yankee?”

The Georgian lady’s breath left her in a big whoosh of air and her hand tensed to slap the other woman.

“How *did* you die?” Roy asked, sticking his head out and narrowing his eyes at the ghost of his wife. Both women turned to him with furrowed brows. “What, did the credit company finally repossess your breathin’ rights to make up for yer infomercial spree?”

If Lou could have breathed fire, it wouldn’t have surprised anyone in the bar if, at that moment, she did. “Roy, that Magic Bullet was worth it, I swear. And,” she continued, taking another angry step forward, “for the record, I died because you left the gas on when you left last night.”

He held his hands up high. “I never touched the gas, Lou!”

“Then how did it get turned on?”

“I don’t know, I swear!”

Suzanna piped in, then, slipping off the bar seat and taking a few steps back. “It was real nice to see you, Roy!”

Lou whirled around faster than a coyote on the chase. “Where do you think yer goin’, Miss Home-wrecker?”

“Home-wrecker?” Suzanna stepped forward and held out her finger. “Do not blame your sorry marriage on me, Lou Jenkins.”

“It wouldn’t *be* a sorry marriage if you hadn’t gone and driven my husband to cheatin’!”

Roy watched them with wide eyes, his gaze going back and forth between the two dead women before he reached behind him, grasped the first bottle he could wrap his thick fingers around, and brought it to his lips. The thick whiskey burned all the way down his throat, but, by God, it felt better than anything he was going to suffer through that night.