

V

The Military Science instructors would tear everything up Monday, inspecting. *To get even.* Dusk faded from the higher red hues to the deep orange glow of sunset. The day was fading.

Ezra walked up to the Huss Shack where sergeants and National Honor Society members were allowed to watch television. They were all mesmerized by *Batman*. Shadows from the western window stretched to nothing.

Ezra stepped outside again, his hands in his pockets--a sin. He thought of the instructor who would inspect A Company, Captain Mastiff. "I never killed anybody in Veet-Name," he would say, "my Huey might've bought a few gook farms, tho'." An animal in human skin. He looked like a policeman. There would be a real fine inspection. Ezra hoped Farris had the Southern Comfort shitcanned by then.

Ezra passed through the secret cut in the Academy fence.

Off limits.

"N," he said to himself, "one letter's all the difference between uniformed and uninformed." He walked down Uvalde Street on the side without streetlights, "Just a couple of n's. N means no."

The houses in this neighborhood were shabby, run-down frame dwellings built long before the Second World War. Abandoned by the small town bourgeoisie, they housed the poor blacks whose former county land had dissolved in the anti-prosperity of real estate developers and welfare offices. The power and telephone lines drooped from pole to pole like these souls from year to year. Fences here did not stand and the streets bore the weather and wear with steady sure sacrifice.

There was a grocery and homespun pharmacy where the old man sold beer. He had the oldest, spindizziest gilt-edged cash register Ezra had ever seen, more ornate even than the old bookstores.

The bell jingled when Ezra stepped through the screen door with the ancient Coca-Cola sign. This store had incense and

tobacco for all uses: chewing, snuffing, dipping, smoking, incanting. Against one wall were all the canned goods and in back was the old freezer for milk and wine. The beer was in a long Coca-Cola ice chest. The counter ran the length of the other wall with the tobacco under glass and behind it was the old man's glorious assortment of remedies, medicines, tonics and elixirs. Every color of label and liquid was behind that counter, for every ailment known, unknown, suspected, or feared. The place smelled of liquor, conjuring and alchemy, as did the old man, his white kinky hair rising behind the crown of his high black forehead, one thousand knowing wrinkles of wise smiles and painful tears.

The face of an apostle. Nicodemus stood braced with a gnarled cane.

A gospel tune played on the gramophone. The player was electrical but the speaker was an old horn, the hearty voice of a big, dark woman pouring forth.

*The people keep a-comin'
but the train done gone.*

"What might a young man need?" the old man almost sang.

"Beer, I think, Nicodemus," Ezra met the old man's eyes with reverence, "then maybe something else."

Nicodemus pulled a couple of beers from a personal cooler under the register. He opened both bottles and gently pushed one toward Ezra.

The first swig is always the coldest and most refreshing.

Every sort of edible flora was home-jarred here. Even the stuff with brand names was unfamiliar to Ezra.

"Wherever you be, you gots to be there wit' the endin'," said Nicodemus. The old man had been reading the newspaper about the war in the Dominican Republic, his home. "You gots to pick the right voodoo."

"Not just be there," Ezra drank, "I want my cut."

"Yes, just that and never more, boy!"

The old man waited patiently.

"Old Man, something for-" Ezra set the empty on the counter and Nicodemus redeemed it with another cold bottle, "-for making a girl like me. L--love." *I want to love and be loved.*

The old man chuckled and perused his concoctions. Oh yes, there was something here for that. Using his step ladder, Nicodemus brought down a small vial. The container had been labeled by fountain pen on white tissue under some yellowing scotch tape.

"Price too high, boy," explained Nicodemus, "you gets in fo' free!"

Ezra held it to the light and read the nebulous prescription.

Upon the fall of night, drink without sadness.

The contents of the vial gave an odor that, once inhaled, filtered through the body, penetrating the muscles into the bloodstream, down to the bone marrow and along the spine by secret routes.

"A toast?" offered Ezra.

"Drink deeply," nodded Nicodemus proudly.

Ezra took a long pull without hesitation. The vial seemed not to be depleted. A new thirst suddenly came over him: the places below and behind his navel warmed to this potion like an oven! Again Ezra tasted it, glowing, then handed the tiny flask back to the old man. Ezra washed it down with another swallow of beer. Nicodemus sipped beer with him and talked of a world Ezra did not comprehend.

The distant woman of the gramophone lamented,

No more cane on the Brazos...

Then it was time to go.

Ezra let the screen door slap closed, jingling the bells.