

Canned heat blues.

THREE PUNKS jumped Victor on Warren Avenue. In broad daylight, in the morning, for God's sake! They knocked him down and went through his pockets. It seemed like three seconds. All he had on him was his bottle, which they smashed on the sidewalk, and then they ran. Jesus whimpered and licked him.

The bottle had been almost empty, but it was Victor's lifeline. He walked to Wayne State University, put a pathetic look on his face (not that he needed to try), and lowered himself once again. By early afternoon he'd scored a home-made sandwich and a handful of coins. By late afternoon, the world was vibrating around him. He didn't have enough change for a pint, but he had enough for canned heat.

Victor took the crosswalk over the Lodge freeway, Jesus hobbling on his three legs behind him. It was close to ninety degrees Fahrenheit. The crosswalk, long and white, reflected sunlight and blinded him; it was shadeless like the railroad right-of-ways Victor worked on when he was young. There was never any break from the sun. He could hear a train in the distance, the sound somehow rising from underneath him. Where was the train? He squinted and shook his way to the university's athletic complex and crossed Trumbull. The party store there seemed like every other party store, Chaldean, family owned and operated. The clerks stayed behind thick bullet proof glass. Always watching. Everyone could see that they carried.

Victor knew right where the Sterno was. He picked up a container and a single serving of orange flavored juice. "Trying to warm up?" the clerk jabbed. Victor's coins jostled in his hands like jumping beans.

"Don't drink that stuff, seriously," the clerk said. "It's killing you."

Victor got outside and couldn't wait. He rounded the corner of the party store, put his back against the cool wall and slid down until he bottomed out. Jesus laid down with him. Shaking, he peeled off the Sterno lid, used his fingers to squish the gelatinous substance into something softer, plopped a glob of it into the juice container, put the palm of his hand over the top, shook it, and put it to his lips. It went down like liquid fire.

Much later Victor's eyes opened. His abdomen hurt. The windows in the houses across the street had lit up and were talking about him. The sun had set. The sky was textured velvet, a royal blue that got darker and darker until it wasn't a sky at all. Something was alive in it, murmuring. The darkness swallowed the housetops and hushed the windows and crossed the street until it reached Victor's outspread feet. And waited.

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