

The Sporting Club

by Con Chapman

There had been a whore house at the spot for a century, since the cowboys drove cattle up the Chisolm Trail to town, to be loaded onto boxcars bound for the Chicago stockyards. Scott Joplin probably played ragtime that some of them heard, sitting in the parlor, while he dreamed of more learned and genteel audiences for his operas.



A hundred years later the only music in the sporting house was on a jukebox, whose lights shone red and blue, and whose records exposed many a man—the club-footed, hare-lipped farmers, men who could get a woman no other way—to B.B. King and Bobby “Blue” Bland, James Brown. The young kids and the high rollers knew those sounds.



There'd be dice in the room off the bar, with cries of "Fade me!" when somebody thought he was getting hot. The girls would lounge around, not much different than their great-great-great grandmothers did. Every now and then a white kid would come in, looking a little lost, trying to appear blasé, as if he'd seen it all before. If he was smart he'd keep his mouth shut. That way he



wouldn't pick up a social disease, or get knifed. If one of the black kids asked for a loan, you knew you'd never see that money again; it was the price of admission to this nether world, far removed from the shining sinks and order of home. Sometimes there'd be posturing, young bucks and old bulls. Zack, the owner, knew what was good for business. "Keep it cool, everybody," he'd say. "Don't nobody



want no trouble. You need to get outside in the night air and chill out, you hear?" He'd usher one--jawing over his shoulder at the other—out the door.

One night it was Zack himself who got into it with one of the Patton boys, Lester, the younger of two. The one with the quick smile, who'd been All-Conference in football. He'd hung around town to take courses at the junior college, trying to get himself a scholarship to a football school.



Lester was out for a little fun and was fooling around with one of the girls.

Zack told him to cut it out, but Lester knew the girl from way back.

"She

can take it," Lester said. "I said cut it out," Zack said, and Lester said "I heard ya."

He figured since he could bench press a man Zack's size, he could handle him. "Then cut it out or git the hell out of my place," Zack said.

"I'll go when I'm damn good and ready," Lester said, and

Zack had a knife out before the breath was off his lips. "You feel froggy,

just leap," Zack said. "Ain't no fence around my ass." "You're an old fool," Lester said, laughing. "I may be an old fool, but I can handle a

damn fool like you any day of the week. Git outta here."

Lester said "I'm goin', don't worry," and put his hands up in the air, as if to show he was submitting to

the older man's will, but as he passed, he grabbed for the knife.

There was a



Im polnischen Gouvernementsbordell

scuffle, and the knife flashed light against brown skin, and red blood flowed. Lester went down, still struggling, while players headed for the door, as if the place was on fire. The girls came out in various states of undress and ran to their homes. One needed the money so bad, she propositioned a boy in an ice truck headed across the tracks to the poultry processing plant. Zack knew they'd find him, so he didn't run. He sat down at the bar and ordered blackberry brandy and a beer, his usual.

Zack got himself a lawyer, who tried to argue that Lester started the fight, that it was his knife. The hare-lipped farmer testified; the jury had trouble understanding him, but they believed him. He'd seen the whole thing, sitting in a chair with a girl on his lap. He didn't want to testify, but the county prosecutor knew where to find him too, and knew he was a regular. He knew he'd probably been there that night. After Zack was convicted, the farmer cried, saying "Where am I gonna get laid now?"

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