

Icehouse

by Katrina Dessavre

It was noon and cloudless when I pulled over next to the icehouse, wedged in the X formed by two dirt roads. I could hear the crunch of aluminum under my wheels, and, when I opened the door, picked up one of the thousands of bottle caps already crushed by the pick up trucks I had passed on my way through the desert.

"There's more where that came from."

The first thing I noticed was his socks, a checkerboard of neon squares set against the concrete porch shaded by a rusty corrugated tin overhang. He was sitting, trousers pulled up, next to a rotary phone, its wire snaking up the pale gray wall right through the three letters drawn in chalk: ICE. The drop shadows seemed an unnecessary, if ironic, touch.

"You sell beer?" I asked.

"No," he laughed, twirling an ice pick between his fingers. "I just sit here watching these big blocks of ice melt and dry up in the sun."

He had everything he needed to sell ice right from the porch: a chute built into the wall, a ball of twine, a cash register, and a fresh block that was starting to soften around the edges. He even had a small note tacked above the chute that said "employees only," as if I would chip off a piece and make away with it while he was inside. I followed him into a room that smelled of sweat and sawdust. It was dark, but I could make out faded Coca-Cola signs and the cloud-shaped stains left by storms that had seeped through the concrete.

"What if I told you that there's a way to store your beer ice cold, in a box half the size of your freezer?"

He reached out to hand me a bottle but stopped halfway and leaned against the counter, his figure framed by a jar of beef jerky on the left and another of hard boiled eggs on the right.

"Are you trying to sell me something, son?"

Flip a finger, and zing -- there are your ice cubes, I was supposed to say, pointing to the brochure I had forgotten in the car. No need for a crowbar to get Frigidaire's Quickube Tray out the refrigerator.

You can get ice easily, instantly, I should have emphasized with all the enthusiasm my supervisor had demonstrated back in our cool, carpet-lined office.

“Just wondering if you'd be interested in a Frigidaire,” was all I could manage to say.

It was only after I watched him take a long draft of beer and crush the cap with his boot that I realized he would rather close up shop and go hunting than listen to the wonders of modern refrigeration. I began to doubt that the brochure, with its color-blocked couple marveling at crisp lettuce, would change his mind.

“Let me show you something,” he said.

He lead me out back, past the closet-sized building made of plywood packing crates I assumed was an outhouse. We were in the sun for a brief moment before stepping into a tangle of shadows cast by branches wider than the icehouse itself.

“It's a mesquite,” he said. “Ancient. It's tapped into a deep spring that has fed it for hundreds of years. That's why it's twice the normal height.”

We looked up through the leaves, silent and still in the deadwind, until the distant sound of bottle caps being crushed under car tires came to a stop.

“That'll be a new delivery,” he said.

