

Frostproof Suite: Saint John's Eve

by Steven Gowin

Everyone at the Bermudez Brothers Combined Shows and Circus held one low opinion or another about Jimmy Dubcek.

The midget lived a cycle of violence and trouble... one thing after another... a broken tooth or black eye, beatings, bad drug deals... jail. Some marveled he wasn't already dead.

He'd lost his driving license to DUI's but could normally talk someone into a ride to Sarasota for "business." That long December night when he hit me up, I'd suggested he walk to Junior's Lounge in Frostproof instead.

But it was South Sarasota or nothing according to Jimmy. He explained that meth trade in Frostproof was like shitting where you eat. And he couldn't bewitch any Ringling wives except at the Venice Lanes and Cocktail. It was a long time to the summer solstice.

Jimmy was the midget fool left in my clown car when the rest of us had piled out. We'd been rehearsing earlier. I'd just outfitted a new rig, but the Bermudez wouldn't pay their share until the new season's start, and we were months from that first gig.

I was strapped, tapped out, busted, but there stood Jimmy, providence sent, talking about C notes, drinks, and a fill up for my Nova. The tiny bastard could charm a snake, and I finally agreed.

We got to Sarasota around 10 PM, and Jimmy made half a dozen sales in the john. I quit drinking after a couple draughts, but he chugged on and on... rock and rye, his favorite. And when he wasn't in the can, those roustie girls swarmed him like they didn't have any damned midgets of their own.

I was sure we'd end in a fight, but the worst of the Ringlings were smoking Jimmy's glass in the parking lot, and the rest seemed too drunk to care. I figured Jimmy'd run home with one of the females, or two, but round about midnight, he put his hand on my shoulder

and said, KiKi, we better head home. It's the longest night of the year.

Back in the car, Jimmy broke out a pint of Fleischmann's Royale and began talking... Said his folks were Mississippi lowlife, drunk most of the time and stupid. He'd a crippled brother... blind or something. They couldn't handle the both of them, so'd sent him to the Bermudez in 1958. He was ten years old.

From that moment on, he said, he got whatever love he could get however he could get it. These show folk ain't how they appear on the TV. They're a cutthroat and selfish bunch. That's the circus way, he said, and added that as soon as a clown understands he's just another fool, he gets something else going. I agreed.

Damn betcha, he said; that's why he'd quit the Bermudez at one point and headed for California. But that never happened; Louisiana had sidetracked him instead, like it was meant to, he supposed. No lie. Snake business. Just fell into it. You catch cotton mouth on a holy day eve... height of potentiality.

The venom distillation required beaucoup snakes, Jimmy said... fifteen to twenty a batch. They'd skin and fillet the dead moccasins too... pickle the bits in Mason jars with Everclear and cardamom. And then this ancient juju priestess, all beads and shawl, added fennel, rosemary, and more to cast a special mojo.

She'd bury it a month someplace secret; then somebody'd drive it to LA, delivered to an old cat in Artesia, East Indian, a Punjabi. You sell it for a thousand an ounce to this Sandeep, or Sanjay... the old man never said his name twice the same and lied about it if you asked.

Man, Jimmy said, he couldn't stand that, couldn't take a liar, did I understand? Lies are so lazy, common tales, heedless of the word. Nothing worse. Anyway, this old boy shipped it out to Bombay, man, Hindustan, Bangalore to Delhi to Jaipur. This was the shit. Hands down beat the Cobra junk cooked domestic.

Zydeco J paralyzes you some, Jimmy told me, banishes pain, physical and otherwise... got a pretty hard damned buzz but mellows

quick and do not dehydrate like crank does do; you see stuff and know it too. He and his boys had tried it one Saint John's Eve.

Barbeque, crayfish and rice. Bonfire... and swamp music on the boom box, Queen Ida and Rockin' Sidney. The juju woman was invité speciale, that's French, Jimmy explained. They'd shared bayou hootch and Chesterfields, and she told him she'd wet nursed every one of those bayou stars.

That long night's 20 years past, Jimmy said from the front of my Nova. He was crying now and finishing that pint fast, going off too, agitated. Mary... Laveau. Just a girl that night, no hag, he whispered... The mouth, her hips and legs, Marie. Zydeco J and swamp lightning... Cane Triple X.

And then she's on me and smells of jasmine and is preachin' about fairy goût; she's a hoodu nurse. She took me there and then, and damned if I didn't try it. I tasted her teets like she told me; sweeter milk was never known.

By now I could barely understand Jimmy, but he muttered something else about the grand mere, and perfect vou dou, and protection. No going back..

True true fact, real talk, that's the story, he slurred. And then he passed out in his booster chair, my Nova's seat belt holding him in... tight and safe.

