

## Cain

---

The white rubber shrimp boots on Cain's clothesline moved hardly at all. They were secured against the humid spring breeze by clothespins fastened directly over the red, made in the U.S.A., stickers at the top. The boots were trying to dry between a denim work shirt and a pair of honestly faded button-front Levis. Cain carefully arranged his underwear and socks for exposure to a single beam of sunlight that slipped through the branches of a senior oak tree. Cain had pitched his tent far enough from the oak to escape the interest of the wood roaches scrambling on the tree's exposed roots. His wooded home site cost him nothing; he was a welcomed homesteader, if a tent person could be so called. Five dense acres separated the truck stop that sustained him from the strip shopping center, which held his single source of entertainment and wonder: the off track betting shop. That Friday morning, in between reflections on life's purpose, Cain's thoughts centered on the Kentucky Derby and the wisdom of his selection.

The earnest owner of Mr. Nguyen's Amoco was well pleased with his arrangement with Cain. Nguyen's truck stop never closed. In spite of the unending procession of eighteen-wheelers, tourists, and locals, the store operated consistently in a state of perfect grooming. Cain saw to that every day.

Mr. Nguyen always arrived to a hosed down parking lot and the strong scent of disinfectant. A dozen times or more a day, Cain emerged from his woods to the back of the premises where he kept his cleaning tools. He roamed the parking lot, gas pumps, store, and truckers' lounge with the darting eyes of one searching for a lost valuable. Each drink spill, cigarette butt, candy wrapper, and can was met with the same compulsive attention. For his part, Mr. Nguyen was happy to offer his off-the-books worker the run of the store and deli, plus the occasional twenty-dollar bill shoved furtively into his palm.

Though Cain's appearance was largely unremarkable, his eyes wore the fatigue of a receding middle age brought sooner by responsibility. The red streaks in his wiry gray beard looked professionally placed. In a sense they were, as they were the handiwork of his maker. Mr. Nguyen thought often that Cain was misplaced in work clothes and pictured him variously in business or military attire. Cain's grooming and posture cast him with a dignity that belied his apparent circumstance. Unaware of his employer's curiosity, Cain remained secure in his arrangement. For the better part of a year, he had gotten by in the woods with most of his material needs plucked from Mr. Nguyen's bountiful shelves.

Mr. Nguyen's only comment on Cain's labors was that they were excessive. "Oh Cain," he would say in his compromised English, "Everything so, so much more clean than other store. But you do too much." He was wary that Cain frequently seemed out of breath after seemingly little expenditure of energy. At these moments Cain would lean forward in the manner of a climber with a burdensome backpack. His reddened face in these episodes worried Mr. Nguyen all the more. But Cain always recovered and declined Mr. Nguyen's offers to have him checked by Nguyen's physician cousin. The owner had fled

the insular community of Little Saigon in eastern New Orleans for the whiter environs of St. Tammany Parish. Mr. Nguyen and his wife hoped to Americanize (their term) a pair of pubescent daughters there. In spite of his baldness, he had happily accepted the nickname, Curly. Phonetically, that name sounded almost the same as his given name in Vietnamese. Learning that bald Americans were commonly called Curly, he saw only humorous irony in the name. Often when introduced, Mr. Nguyen would remove his well-worn Saints' cap, rub the top of his head, and affirm, "I'm Curly," with a laugh. He was a Rotarian, a Knight of Columbus, and never missed a Republican fund-raiser. And if his deal with Cain was a small tax dodge, well, all the more American.

If their bond was not exactly a friendship, extensions of kindness and concern were frequently exchanged. Mr. Nguyen noticed Cain never took more of anything than he absolutely needed and often seemed reluctant to do even that. He also noticed that Cain's mannered good cheer exhausted itself if conversations turned deeply to the personal. Wary of disrupting the balanced rapport with his tenant, Mr. Nguyen quickly adopted conversational limits pleasing to Cain. He knew neither from where Cain had come nor where he might be going. He knew his place of business was better for Cain's presence, that Cain lived in the woods, and played the horses at the OTB. That he knew of him, and no more.

For Cain's father, the gamble had been his life. His *métier* was the track in general and the New Orleans Fair Grounds in particular. His talent enabled the widower to educate his six children through college and into respectable professions. The father saw his life's work progress from illegal bookmaker to that of the completely legal professional horseplayer. Thanks to a totally self-directed betting system, the latter proved much more profitable than the former. In his college years, the son had learned much of the system first-hand before pursuing his own non-gambling career. At the unexpected death, Cain, the first-born, directed his father's leave taking. Sorting through his effects, he came upon a file containing the betting system that had been the family's financial lifeline. For years that file remained untouched in a tackle box beneath Cain's bed.

One Thanksgiving eve, Cain heard a radio ad promoting opening day at the Fair Grounds. Curious as to whether the system still worked, he bought a racing form and raised the file. Although detailed, the system was not complex and despite years away from the track, Cain quickly reacquainted himself with its application.

After some sporadic and minimal successes, the system suddenly went cold on Cain and losses mounted steadily. His own improvisation only made matters worse. What was he doing wrong? His father had never experienced such misfortune. The system was designed for low-risk, steady returns and now it was blowing up in his face. After months of punishment, the financial pain just became too great; he stopped all betting and made only paper transactions. These he analyzed in depth. Pages of charts, figures, and results cluttered his quarters. At a point of near despair, Cain's diligence was rewarded.

What at once seemed so obvious had eluded his study for weeks. Had he eliminated all turf races from his betting record, the system would have been ahead handily. In his father's day, all races in New Orleans were on dirt. The grass course had been built some five years after the parent's passing. Certainly, Cain thought, his father would have mastered the nuances of turf racing, but that was a matter of fleeting importance. Armed with his discovery, Cain crept back into real competition with the expected winning result.

There were no slow days at the OTB's video poker machines. The players sat joined at the elbow in a perimeter chain around the walls of the betting parlor. The racetrack crowd bulged in the smoky, casino-cool salon on the weekends but was sparse the rest of the time. The video poker players ground away day and night, weekdays and weekends alike, oblivious to the rants of the horseplayers. The cigarettes and profanity hearkened to a male bastion of yesteryear, though ladies now predominated on the machines.

Excepting Tuesdays, when most tracks were closed, Cain took his position about noon at the end of the bar beneath a bank of six television screens. Each screen displayed a simulcast signal imported from a different racetrack around the country. Routinely he ordered a single draught beer, which he nursed throughout each afternoon. The beer glass on the bar served as a seat-occupied sign when Cain periodically excused himself to check on affairs at Mr. Nguyen's Amoco. Most of the system's analysis took place well ahead of post time and typically dictated only three or four plays per day. Cain missed no betting opportunities and Mr. Nguyen's Amoco retained its spotless condition.

Two days before the Kentucky Derby, Jake the bartender drew Cain's customary brew. Jake penetrated little more of the private Cain than did Mr. Nguyen, though both shared Cain's day in roughly equal parts. The bartender, though, had watched the transition of Cain from a non-betting, furious note-taker to a bettor equipped with a justified confidence of copious proportion. As impassive as Cain was, his winning was no secret on the opposite side of the bar. "Church, four, two, Jakie; five-oh win," Cain mumbled, signaling a fifty dollar win bet on the two horse in the fourth race at Churchill Downs. He spoke in the code of his father's bookmaking community. Quietly Jake removed fifty from the cache of bills, deposited by Cain behind the bar daily, and proceeded to the mutual window with the investment. Knowing Cain carried him for a 5% stake in all winnings made Jake a happy messenger. When the fifty-dollar investment returned almost two hundred, the messenger's joy only grew. That day's business produced a four-hundred ninety dollar gain for Cain and a heady supplement to Jake's tip glass. Results of this kind had become commonplace in recent months.

"Saturday, Jakie, wait'll Saturday," Cain whispered. The bartender stared into a space where no eye contact existed, in the manner of a casino pit boss, displaying no more emotion than Cain which was to say: none. "I'll be here, Boss man," Jake uttered, "I'll be here. Don't you worry about that."

The following day produced a rare Friday absence from the OTB for Cain. His work on the Derby had produced a betting mandate that was of almost papal certainty under his

father's system. The father knew that horse racing held no such outcome as a mortal lock or a dead cert, terms fancied by professionals. The son had learned it was all about probabilities and relative value. If the morning line odds on the Kentucky Derby held even remotely to form, Cain was looking at a proposition the likes of which was chronicled only once in his father's logs: the 1982 Kentucky Derby. In that race, the disregarded Gato del Sol cantered home at 22/1. The characteristics shared by Churchill Downs and his more familiar Fair Grounds made the system ideal for the Kentucky Derby. Cain could certainly live with another 1982 payoff but incredulous of his conclusion, he would need a day in the woods to affirm his findings. The day ended as it began; on Saturday there would be a major play for Jake to execute: "Church, nine, three. Three dimes win."

Derby Day at the OTB was like a church on Easter Sunday full of once-a-year visitors. Several races before the big one, a small group entered with uniform physiques that said Louisiana, white male, and fifty. Their girths were swelled by decades of fried seafood, red beans, and Dixie beer; their front teeth were too white and straight to be original issue. Their baggy, knit shirts had sleeves below the elbow and bore logos of golf events long past. Eight of them moved to the bar followed uncertainly by a less rotund man of the same generation. His black pants, generic knit shirt, and reticence contrasted sharply with his fellows.

The larger and more red-faced of the golf shirts placed his substantial right arm around the far shoulder of the group's uncertain member and announced: "Y'all this heah Monsignor Tulle. Hoss named for him gonna win the Derby shortly." The regulars nearby looked up from their forms with little interest at the declaimer, but Patrick Tulle's face reddened at his introduction. "Sonny!" the Monsignor whispered sternly to his L.S.U. roommate, "for the love of God, no more of that, please. You know what the Archbishop said!" "Aw shit, Paddy. D'awchbishop needs to loosen up. It's Doiby day and youdda man. Line up them Dixies, bawtender." Jake gave Sonny his best pit-boss gaze and obliged with a row of rodeo- cold Dixie beers.

Patrick Tulle's embarrassment was understandable. A major scandal involving a priest in the Archdiocese of New Orleans had created an atmosphere of martial law for all of the clerics there. The Reverend Brendan Finney, a senior administrator for the Church's charities, had apparently diverted funds from the St. Vincent de Paul Society to finance a weakness for gambling on horses. The conclusion was still an apparent one, but Father Finney had disappeared concurrently with the discovery of a \$100,000 shortfall at the Society. The story had received attention from the national press. "Pony Playing Padre Palms Poor Box," led the New York Post, "Let Us Prey," headlined another tabloid. A pair of compliant public officials, specifically the Chief of Police and District Attorney in Orleans Parish, assured that in the absence of any charge from the Church, the only police matter would involve a missing person's report. There would, of course, be no charges filed.

The owner of Monsignor Tulle, the horse, was also a college mate and had invited his colt's namesake to Churchill Downs for the big day. Would the Archbishop approve that

all expenses paid trip? He would not. The last thing the Church needed at this moment was a national television audience viewing a story line associating the priesthood with horse racing, much less a connection to New Orleans. Would the Archbishop allow the Monsignor to attend a Derby party with college buddies in Covington? The Monsignor had long ago learned the value of what an ethics professor at the seminary termed a mental reservation and thus no mention was made of the party's precise location. Well, that might be allowed, but the roman collar would best be left home and a low profile maintained. And so there Patrick was, in a cumulus formation of smoke, hoping to be an inconspicuous part of a tableau of horseplayers and video poker addicts.

Cain moved his program and figure sheets around with his fingertips giving the false impression he was deep in handicapping calculations. The fact was that Cain had concluded before the day began that Monsignor Tulle was as good a betting proposition as he had found since implementing his father's system. Jake concealed his anxiety to know the choice with chatter about earlier races on the card.

The anonymity that Cain valued so highly at the OTB seemed strengthened by the Derby crowd until Mr. Nguyen made his annual visit to make a Derby wager. Cain's discomfort at his provider's bonhomie went undetected and with apparent enthusiasm he accepted Mr. Nguyen's offer of a round of beers. As Mr. Nguyen's pleas to the bartender went unnoticed, Cain held up two fingers and Jake immediately responded. Two icy bottles of Dixie beer immediately appeared which Mr. Nguyen rushed to pay for. "Putcha money away podnuh," Jake warned in a thick New Orleans yat accent, "Mista Cain buyin' dis round."

The boisterous clusters of Derby bettors debating their picks with increasing intensity and volume rendered the television commentary inaudible until My Old Kentucky Home was struck. That moment's solemnity stilled regulars and once-a-year players alike. The noise dropped to murmur level long enough for Cain to instruct Jake cryptically: "Church nine, three. Three dimes win." Mr. Nguyen stared in utter confusion as Jake moved his eyes far enough to the left to see who the three was on his Derby program. Quickly Jake grabbed the envelope beneath him, ducked under the service bar, and headed for the mutuel window. Before the clueless Mr. Nguyen could inquire, Cain locked his provider's eyes into his own and spoke: "Curly, I think you might want to bet the three horse here." Cain's advice was delivered with the same disinterest with which a veteran poker player might make a limit raise while peering over a full house.

The din quickly returned as the horses exited the post parade and broke into a pre-race canter. A graphic on the screen displayed the current odds. The price on Monsignor Tulle, generous in the morning line at 12-1, had ballooned to 20-1. The two constituencies of number three stood in contrasting levels of confidence. The bellowing golf shirts, with Sonny leading the chorus, were reduced to groans when the long odds on the Monsignor were displayed. Cain viewed the public's dismissal of his choice as an act of generosity.

The deserving even-money favorite, a son of the mighty Storm Cat, was on the crest of a four race win streak, the latest of which was a stunning four-length score in the Blue Grass Stakes. In that race, Monsignor Tulle had made up good ground while closing from last of twelve, but his third place finish was some six lengths removed from Stonn Center at the wire. Not lost on Cain was that this losing margin was nearly identical to that of Gato del Sol to Linkage in the 1982 Blue Grass. The large contingent of speed horses and stalkers entered in the current Derby renewal, concluded Cain, set the race up for a deep closer, 1982 style. Monsignor Tulle alone fit that billing. Ironically the Monsignor would be partnered by Eddie Delahoussaye in what the rider had announced would be his last Kentucky Derby. The durable Eddie D, old-timers remembered, had done the deed on the plodding son of Cougar II in 1982.

All of these nuances were lost on the golf shirts as well as their ordained companion. That group, after seeing the odds board, put their chances at the probability level of a winning power ball ticket. Cain did nothing to curtail their angst. The results, he was sure, would take care of that.

A muffled roar greeted the start of the race and briefly stilled the whirl of the video poker machines. Most of the players raised their eyes to the monitors above them to watch what would probably be their only race of the year. A cluster of speed burst from the gate and there were six colts within a length of the lead going into the first turn. The favored Stonn Center was covered up behind them with Monsignor Tulle some twenty lengths behind the leader and a full complement of opposition in front of him.

"The Monsignor can see them, but they can't see him," chirped one of the golf shirts sarcastically to no one's amusement but his own. With a half mile to run, Cain's choice had passed a few tiring opponents, but was only a handful of lengths closer to the leader upon which Stonn Center, laying third, was preparing to pounce. To this point, Cain's expression had not changed at all leaving Jake and Mr. Nguyen in a state of total uncertainty as to their developing prospects. Sonny broke his fast of bellows with a booming, "Come on Monsignor!" as he pumped his fist in a bell ringing motion.

With a quarter of a mile remaining, Stonn Center could wait no more and cruised into the lead. Monsignor Tulle continued to improve his position though widest of all. The favorite vaulted into the long stretch in apparent total command moving farther away from all except Monsignor Tulle. Only a furlong remained when it was clear that only the Monsignor offered any threat to Stonn Center who was now under a hard drive but still a good three lengths ahead. By now the yells were lusty and even Cain rose to his feet. As Cain stood, Mr. Nguyen noticed the reddened face and labored breathing that had concerned him before. Cain accepted Mr. Nguyen's steadying hands without acknowledgement as their eyes fixed on the television monitor.

"Come on tree, come on tree!" screamed one of the few black patrons as he lost his balance, fingers snapping, and bumped into Cain and Mr. Nguyen. Immediately the golf shirts, sensing their power ball chance improving, continued the refrain: "Come on tree, come on tree!"

As fast as Monsignor Tulle was closing on the leader, the door to the remaining ground in the race was closing faster. At this point in 1982, Eddie D had been safely in front. This time, it appeared, he had left too much to do. But in the final yards, Stonn Center's shortening stride and Monsignor Tulle's grit closed the remaining gap and the pair crossed the finish line as one. Suddenly the audience was awed and barely a word was spoken. Photo finish and not one person offered an opinion; that is until Cain held three fingers up. His index finger was inlaid on his thumb like an ok sign in the manner of a basketball referee identifying a fouler. Jake then let out a howl and began shaking his head uncontrollably as he rushed to the cashier. His confidence in Cain was total and when the results were official, well justified. Sonny hugged the Monsignor while Mr. Nguyen and "Come on tree" exchanged high-fives.

Mr. Nguyen was offering to buy drinks when Jake returned with Cain's winnings. Cain accepted the congratulations and made sure that Jake had taken his usual cut. He then politely refused the drink offer citing his duties at the truck stop. With the exception of the celebrating golf shirts, the OTB quickly returned to normal. A few players awaited the late California races and the video poker machines ding-donged in their usual constant rhythm.

After Mr. Nguyen and Jake had exchanged brief words of praise for Cain, Mr. Nguyen asked Jake the question that nagged him. "Jake, you know if Cain is his first name or his last name? He only tell me Cain." Jake was no nearer to the answer. "Beats me Mista Coily, foist name, last name. Don't know. Might not be either one." The conversation ended there and Jake resumed his pit boss stare. Mr. Nguyen returned to his place of business in its usual state of cleanliness.

The next Monday, just before dawn, the one constant in Mr. Nguyen's life disappeared. He smelled no disinfectant as he drove into his truck stop and the parking area was littered with cans and wrappers. Briefly the thought that the newly, financially flush Cain might have moved on entered his mind. That thought was soon replaced by concern as he recalled Cain's spell on Derby Day. Mr. Nguyen parked and headed straight for the woods. He carefully followed the rutted path to the clearing where Cain camped.

Mr. Nguyen stopped short of what he hoped was a sleeping Cain, who lay on his side facing away from the visitor. A blanket covered Cain from the waist down protecting him from what was probably that spring's last chill. "Good morning, Mr. Cain," he spoke loudly and hopefully. Cain's silence sickened Mr. Nguyen in a way he hadn't felt since abandoning his napalmed village a world away. His life experience had witnessed few unmarked, lifeless bodies in peaceful rest. He knelt and secured Cain's right hand in his own left hand searching for a pulse that wasn't there. With his right hand he made a sign of the cross. Cain's left index and middle fingers marked a page somewhere near the middle of a tattered book. His thoughts raced back to his late adolescence in Viet Nam and the French priest he served there as an altar boy. "Le breviaire," he said softly to himself as he removed the breviary from Cain's grasp. Mr. Nguyen then released Cain's hand and reached for a dented tackle box that was open an arm's length away. At the

bottom of the box was carefully sorted currency, mostly twenties and hundreds. A sheet of four-time folded legal paper contained a single column of figures with no heading. To the right of each figure was a date. The top line read (\$113,000) - 7/15. Each line below showed a diminishing parenthetical sum and dates of increasing frequency, usually a month or so apart. A zero so large it must have been a milestone of some kind preceded the tenth entry on 3/19. The sums below all had plus signs before them showing a steady increase in value. The most recent entry on May 3 was two days old; it read +\$74,000. A half-full box of envelopes completed the box's contents. The envelopes were identical. They bore a printed address and a no postage necessary designation in the place a stamp would go. The envelopes were addressed to The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, New Orleans, Louisiana.