

Interlude At Dawn

Rex Van Trees

Joey, Minnie Wilson's little black rooster, ended his raucous greeting to the new day and began to strut proudly about the back yard, pausing only to preen the glossy feathers of his neck or to peck at some nearly invisible object on the ground.

Minnie, awakened from a deep slumber, appeared at the back door of her dilapidated cottage, squinted in the direction of the rising sun and yawned, exposing a few, widely spaced, dirty yellow teeth. Her grimy night dress hung loosely to her knees, the material a mass of deep, horizontal wrinkles, ironed in during the sleep of many nights. Grunting softly, she scratched at her fat bell shaped body. The night dress rose and fell, its wrinkles expanding and contracting like loosely wound springs.

While Minnie occupied herself in this manner, Esta Gage emerged from her own frail dwelling next door. Walking briskly into her back yard, Esta emptied the dishpan she was carrying, pouring the dirty-grey water forcibly out upon the ground. Some of the water splashed through the holes in the rotten board fence, striking Joey. Leaping high into the air, he came down, a frightened flurry of feathers. Screaming chicken language, and with his tail feathers dancing as he ran, he fled to the rear of the broken down wood-shed behind Minnie's cottage.

Jerked from her reverie, Minnie clucked sympathetically. Shaking her finger in mock anger, she called, "Now lookie there, Esty, honey. You near scared my pore little baby to death!"

Esta grinned broadly. "That little ole rooster can really run up a storm

when he gets to goin'."

"He's jus' awful nervous, my baby is. He sure is a comfort to me though, pore ole lady living all alone."

Both women stood for a moment, gazing in the direction of Joey's retreat.

Minnie was the first to break the silence. "Whatcha doin' up so early, Esty? goin' somewheres?"

The furrows in Esta's forehead deepened and her eyes flashed. "Wasn't to bed whole night long. That man o' mine didn't come home when he got off from work las' night."

Minnie's small blue eyes widened, almost imperceptibly. Her felt house slippers, from which all ten toes protruded, made a soft padding sound as she made her way to the fence which separated her from Esta. She leaned forward and whispered, "Bill ain't chasin' agin is he?"

"Don't know. Now if he is, he better never leave me catch him. I told him last time I wasn't gonna have no more of that dang foolishness. He jus worry me to death." Esta paused, awaiting Minnie's sympathy.

Minnie did not disappoint her. "Sure is a shame, you been a awful good wife to that man. Can't see why he acks the way he does to you."

Her object gained, Esta hastened to change the topic of conversation. "I sat in the front window most all of the night, watchin' out for Bill to come home." Esta lowered her voice, half-closed her eyes. "Wait'll I tell you what I saw!"

Minnie and Esta drew nearer to one another, their faces nearly touching above the fence.

"Whadja see?" Minnie prompted, with ill concealed impatience.

"Well," Esta continued, "like I said, I was a lookin' out the window and watchin' for Bill when that Brady woman across the street come home about ten o'clock. She sure thought she was sumpin' fine, got out of a big car with some guy on her arm, an laughin' that silly giggle of hers. Walked him right into the house with her too, just as big as you please."

"What happened then?" Minnie's interest was fully aroused.

Esta stepped back half a step. "Well, now, I can't for sure say what did happen, but they sure was in that house together for a long time. That fella didn't leave 'til nearly 'leven o'clock."

Minnie was plainly disappointed, the tenseness that had been in her body, as she listened, visibly relaxed.

Esta, however, had no intention of relinquishing her position in the lime-light. "But wait, let me tell you something else I found out about that shameless hussy yesterday."

Minnie's face brightened and once more she became attentive.

"Her little girl, Edith, was over here yesterday in the afternoon, playin' with my Ethel." Esta explained. "Course now, I don't approve of my Ethel playin' with such as that, but you know how kids is, an' anyway, you know what Edith told

my Ethel?" Esta paused dramatically, allowing the suspense to grasp Minnie.

"Well," she continued, "Edith told my Ethel that her mother never washed her face in soap and water at all!"

Minnie gasped and stood, wide mouthed. "You don't mean it?"

"Yessir, just what she said. Said her mother never washed her face in soap and water at all. Said she used this cleansing cream stuff all the time to clean her face with. Can you imagine?"

Esta withdrew a step and watched carefully to note the impression she had made. At this moment, the front door of her house slammed shut. Not waiting, she dashed back into the house.

Minnie stood, mouth still agape, unseeing. Finally, she turned, walking as one in a trance. Shaking her head slowly from side to side, she made her way back to the door of her cottage. As she did so, she muttered softly to herself. "Cleansing cream — will I never — cleansing cream. Hmm." She smiled craftily.

Minnie's broad form was fading into the doorway as Joey's head peeked cautiously from behind the wood-shed. Seeing no immediate threat to his safety, he strolled leisurely back into the yard, clucking softly, pausing only to preen the glossy feathers on his neck or to peck at some nearly invisible object on the ground.

PURPLE PATCH

The night descends, casting weird shadows, engulfing the city, hiding the evil, dispelling the good. It opens the gateway to uncontrolled imagination, and is the symbol of iniquity in all its fury.

— Jack Averitt.