

“Dear Uncle Sam...”

Chad Johnston ENG 215 (Spring 1997)

“Dear Uncle Sam,

You have warships and jet planes and tanks and nuclear weapons... So why am I still wasting away as a prisoner of war in this cell? Why? You said you needed me to fight for my country. This don't fit my definition of fighting. I'm fighting to stay sane. That's what I'm doing. If I could get my hands on your red, white, and blue flag I'd burn her to ashes and spread her from sea to shining sea. That's what I'd do. You and your draft... you and your draft from Hell. My wife and kids and I would all like to see you burn-”

I'll have to finish this letter later. I hear the guard approachin.' Probably suppertime.

“Here's your food,” the guard says.

Every time, it's the same guy. He talks through that little slit in the door and acts like he's Santa Claus with a big surprise for me... and it's always bread and water. Water and bread. Sometimes he puts the water on the left side of the tray with the bread on the right. Sometimes he puts the bread on the left and the water on the right 'cause he thinks I'll see it as a whole different meal. He thinks I'm a fool.

I ain't nobody's fool.

“Am I a fool, Ted?” Teddy can't talk. Been a mute as long as I can remember. But he means well. He always agrees with me. His silence is agreement enough for me.

“You just speak right on up if you think I'm a fool.”

Teddy's still quiet.

“You’re right, Teddy. I’m not a fool. I’m a black man trapped in Hell. Hell on Earth... Uncle Sam says I got Hell to pay. He’s a quiet man, Ted. But he told me I got Hell to pay. He’s a rich bully with a fancy-man top-hat and a goat’s beard on his chin. He likes to stomp on the black man, grind him down into the ground with his big fat shiny pilgrim shoes.”

Uncle Sam might as well be the devil.

I take a bite of the bread and it’s stale like usual. At least the water isn’t brown. When I was about seven or eight, growing up tall and lanky like a cornstalk along the outskirts of the Mississippi river in Louisiana, my friend Tom and I would fill up ol’ milk jugs with river water and we’d dare each other to drink it. *That* was brown water. I bet you could bottle that muck and sell it as hard liquor. Ain’t no drunk out there gonna tell the difference.

That was twenty-some years ago. I was just a strap on my mom’s shoe. A boy becomes a man and a man gets sent off to fight battles bigger than any man ought to have to fight. A man don’t come out of these battles with a black eye or a fat lip. No, he come out dead. And he-

“What time is it, Ted?”

Teddy and I... we been here forever. Before God done created the Earth, we was sittin’ here. We was sittin’ here just a starin’ at them white walls and the cracks in the ceiling of this cell. I suppose we’ll still be sittin’ here when God decides to tear down this earth too. And if some dictator-cuckoo-bird beats God to the job by blowin’ up the earth with one of them new-fangled atom bombs... we won’t be here near as long. I’d like to get outta’ here, but if no one’s lookin’ for us, then I’m rootin’ for the dictator-cuckoo-bird. Sad thing is, that cuckoo bird’s

probably gonna be Uncle Sam.

We been here forever.

“Teddy, how old am I?”

Teddy is still quiet.

“That’s alright, Ted. If you don’t know, then you just don’t *know*. That’s all there is to it.”

I remember the time I turned twenty-seven... or was it twenty-nine? I don’t even know how old I am. Sad that an educated man don’t even know how old he is. In secondary school, we read Milton and studied philosophy and... well, all that learnin’ ain’t much good here.

Milton don’t hold much ground when it comes to war. I didn’t quote no stanzas from *Paradise Lost* when I was out in the field, bullets rippin’ holes in the sky. But paradise was certainly lost out on them fields. Nothin’ heavenly about the stench of flesh and blood. Milton might have been closer to me on that battlefield than he was when I was gettin’ educated. Paradise lost... I remember the time when my good friend Heathcliff was all hunkered down behind a big ol’ rock, and a bullet clean tore his jaw off. Didn’t have no last words ‘cause he couldn’t say nothin.’ Jus’ mumbled and gurgled and made like a stinkin’ fool, he did. A man’s last words are always important. Especially if he’s flooding a field with his own blood.

“Tell my family I love them.”

Those would be my last words. I don’t want to have to say ‘em though... not any time soon at least. I want outta’ here. I wanna’ go home. I want to kiss the picket fence that goes ‘round the house and I want to sleep under the oak in the front yard. My wife’s probably

waitin' by the gate at the house. Waitin' for me to come home. And my kids... They was so little when I left. I wonder if they'd know that I'm their Daddy. I still remember their tiny hands wavin' at me as I headed for the army base. I remember the looks on their faces. Their eyes was all red from cryin,' and they was frownin.' They held so tight to their Mama's dress... They was so sad.

But I was sadder.

Uncle Sam once told me that I was his child. I was his baby. "I want you, son," he said, his big ol' finger jutting out at me like I was his only hope. He looked real sincere, but I told him that I already had a Daddy and that I didn't need another one. He said it again. "I want you, son." I told him no--flat out--and a few months later he sends me a draft notice. How do you like that?

"How do like that, Teddy?"

I don't like it at all.

Teddy, I wish you could speak. I wish we weren't here. All this thinkin' is makin' me dizzy. Or maybe I'm dizzy from bein' here for too long.

"Teddy, is it just me, or is the room swishing around, all seasick-like? Probably just me, but I can't tell. (Pause.) Hey, get this: Father Time's just playin' mad on his ol' trombone in my head. Fast and mad, he is. He got a big backup band and they know how to swing. But you know what, Ted? Father Time can't *keep* time! Ha!"

(Pause.)

"Teddy."

(Pause.)

“You could at least smile, Teddy.”

Sometimes I wonder if Teddy is dead. The guard ain't taken him away yet, and he don't stink or nothin.' But his eyes are just dark and cold and shiny. Some big tornado plowed through his eyes 'cause you can't see a soul or a man behind them. He keeps me company though. Sometimes, if I'm all out of things to write to Uncle Sam, I just sit and think about Teddy. He can't talk, so I don't know where he's from or why he is the way he is, so I make somethin' up. Ain't nothin' better to do. As I figure it, he probably fought in the trenches back in one of them World Wars. Never could keep them things straight. World War One. World War Two. A fightin' man he was, but he probably got his tongue cut out by a Frenchman or something.

And I always go back to his last words.

(Pause.)

I'm sure he said something patriotic. He just looks like the patriotic type. Probably said something like “Long live the red, white, and blue.” Then the ol' Frenchman probably gave his tongue a yank with some pliers and said, “We sent you the Statue of Liberty and you didn't send us nothin.' Now you got Hell to pay.”

“Here's to you, Teddy,” I say as I toss down an imaginary gulp of bourbon.

“And here's to Uncle Sam.” The letter. I almost forgot. Where was I?

“My wife and kids and I would all like to see you burn.” Maybe if I threaten him...

“And Sam, if you don't get me out of here, I'm going to come get you. I will rip your

head off and stick it on a post in my backyard and everybody will laugh at your bloody top-hat.

I will-”

Too crude.

This letter looks better all crumpled up on the floor anyway. I will start again.

“Dear Uncle Sam,

I like your top-hat. I love America. God bless the USA.”

Too nice.

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“So what’s up with this guy?” A man in a long white lab-coat asks, looking through the hand-sized window in the door at Teddy and pointing at his colleague.

“Delusional. He thinks he’s a prisoner of war. Get this... he also thinks he’s black,” snidely snickers a skinny man wearing a thick black-rimmed pair of bifocals.

“You’re not supposed to make fun of the patients,” says a man wearing a navy blue Armani. “Patients are people just like you and I.”

Armani is a member of the asylum staff and he’s also on the welcoming committee. Lab-coat is the one being welcomed. He’s a psychology major doing a bit of job shadowing. He wears the lab-coat in order to enhance that feeling of “being on the job.” Bifocals is the asylum’s psychiatric medicine lab-rat and the son of the head of staff at the asylum. No one is willing to give him too much flack because he’s got connections.

“People like who?” Bifocals probes. “Like me? No, not me. I don’t sit around all day and talk to a little teddybear all day long. ‘Teddy, you’re my special friend. Teddy, this. Teddy

that.”

“Listen,” says Armani. “Our friend in there is a human being. Before he became mentally ill-”

“You mean before he cracked?” Bifocals doesn’t know when to quit. “Man, the guy ran through the downtown area with an Uzi, yelling ‘You’re all commies! I’ll hunt you down! I’ll hunt all of you reds down and you’ll bleed your Russian blood all over the streets until you don’t *believe* in Communism anymore! Power to the people!”

Armani stands there, quiet, but raging inside like tea kettle about to whistle.

“Be quiet and let me finish. *Before* he became mentally ill, he was a writer of historical fiction. I believe that these delusions stem directly from his occupation. He wrote a book about a black prisoner of war and... it’s almost like he’s taken the role of the protagonist upon himself. He’s only a resident of this asylum because he goes on violent rampages when we let him out. He thinks the whole world is at war and no one can convince him otherwise. That’s why he’s here,” says Armani, pointing to the asylum’s freshly waxed hallway floor for emphasis. “We may be able to let him out in a few years, but only time will tell.”

Silence all around.

Armani turns back the locks and enters the room. Bifocals snickers again and whispers something into Labcoat’s ears about the patient running down the streets and shouting, “The British are coming! Duck and cover!” Lab-coat is amused.

“Well hello there! How are you?” Armani says casually to the room’s two occupants. Teddy is quiet and one of his eyes is about to pop off. The thread holding it on is fraying and

coming undone. What beautiful black button eyes they are too. But how lifeless.

The letter.

“What’s this? You’re still writing Uncle Sam? Well, we’ll get this to him right away, okay?” Armani spreads a smile like a slogan and walks out the door.

“What a nutbag,” says Bifocals under his breath as Armani locks the door. “Everybody gather ‘round and read this. This is bound to be cute.”

The letter, written on a piece of scrap fabric leftover from the curtain cutout pattern in Bifocals’ office, is written in purple crayon. Located immediately below the writing is a drawing of Teddy dressed in his Sunday best.

“Dear Uncle Sam,

Hello. I am a prisoner of war in a country far, far away from you. My friend Teddy is with me and he is also a prisoner of war. We would like to go home. We don’t know how long we’ve been here, but we know it’s been too long. We ain’t got no fancy Leer jets or nothing, so you’ll have to come pick us up. Please come and get us. We miss our families, Uncle Sam. And we like your top-hat.

Sincerely,

G. I. Joe.”