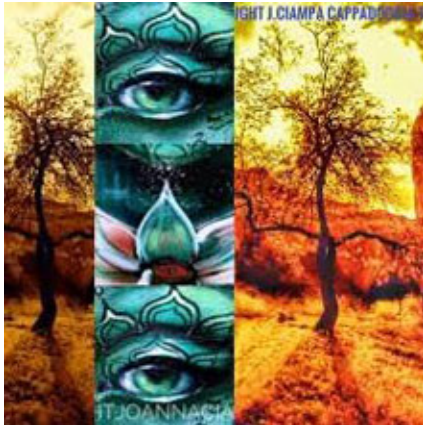




A story by Jack Sparacino

Don Lopez's once comfortable suburban house looked and smelled like a Japanese aircraft carrier. Dive bombed by the US Navy off Midway Island in 1942. The air wreaked. Carla, Sarah, Joanna and Melody gagged on the fetid aftermath of the RPG attack. Lopez was half buried in bricks, pipes, furniture and mortar. Carla staggered to her full five feet eight String Bean height and looked over Don's crumpled mass.

His legs were a crushed mess, his eyes vacant slum lots. She pulled out her compact and held the mirror to his mouth. Nothing. She felt for his pulse. Nothing. Adios, amigo. May God forgive your sins.

Sarah, Joanna, and Melody dragged themselves up from this alter of death. They stared at each other, dazed and confused. Each formerly lovely woman looked like she had been buried alive. None could speak clearly yet, only spit a few words.

"What the hell was that?" croaked newbie Melody Danforth, her home destroyed. Joanna Ciampi fixed her foggy gaze on the wreckage and Don's still warm corpse. Instinctively, she grabbed his \$15,000 blue Rolex Submariner watch. "We got sort of bombed, ladies, and not on champagne this time. Our sniper upped his game. And signed his death certificate. We're going to haul his greasy ass into court or the morgue. His choice. Personally I don't give a damn. He'll be burnt toast either way. Between you and me, I prefer the morgue. We can have some fun with his butt before Saint Christopher comes calling for him. Or the devil."

Carla interrupted their satanic reverie with a softly growled challenge. “We need a new plan, ladies, before the refs call the game. Maybe I don’t deserve to be team captain anymore. My entrancing eyes only work on men close up. These guys are air mailing our destruction. They don’t care how slick we look, they want blood. Oblivion. And blood they’ll get once we regroup, reorganize and plan.

Plan for what?” wailed Melody. “I loved that old pile of pock marks and bile. He found me as a kid in Brazil, taught me how to develop my assets, work hard, how to lean in, how to kill. Make my mark. He tried sometimes but he never killed my soul, not over all the money anyway. I’m still me, still young, and I can paint with the pros. We can always hire a new base player for the band, by the way. Someone who doesn’t talk down to us. Or play us for pretty fools.”

“First let’s get cleaned up and order some sandwiches or something,” said Carla. “I don’t know what driver would pick us up looking like this, but what the hell, we’ll leave him a nice tip. Sarah, would you call Palmetto Cab and tell them we have a VIP group for them. Those guys’ll scramble someone out here pronto. Whoops, I think I just sounded like I was back on an aircraft carrier. Tell them whatever you want.”

Sarah was a wreck but she knew how to make a phone call from the rubble. She did it back in her homeless days and she would do it now. “G-good m-morning, ah, g-good afternoon, sir. I’ve got a VIP group of four in Mount Pleasant and we need to go downtown. Pronto. I mean, right away. We’ve got an important business meeting coming up and if we’re even a l-little late a huge d-deal goes d-down in flames. C-can you take us, hon?” She gave the dispatcher both addresses and thanked him with all the southern charm she could muster beneath an inch of grime. “Ah’m on it, miss, be right there,” he said. Probably. Or had it been “Admonish”? No way, she thought, there wasn’t any of that down here. No Amish either.

The cab showed up in fifteen minutes, clean as a cat’s paw. The ladies piled in the back like filthy refugees from 9/11. At least that’s what the driver said. He was blond, a little heavy, droopy eyed and young. Maybe early twenties. The wisp of a mustache he wore looked like it took him three months to grow. Pathetic, String Bean thought, why don’t you either shave the damn thing off or get a decent one to stick on. Try Monty’s Mustache and Massage Parlor, you little twerp.

“Hey, ladies, looks like you’ve been working construction or something. My name’s Trip Jackson. Call me Trip. Easy name to remember for a cab driver, huh?” The back seat barely

grunted. Finally, he started blabbering about his two years in the army's Delta Force. Carla, Sarah and Joanna sat mesmerized. Maybe this flabby dude ate his way out of the service. The army did know how to cook.

They interrupted him when he mentioned Hurricane Jane, his superior officer. "Hold on a second, Trip," said Carla. I've heard about her. Fortyish, medium height and build, perfectly coiffed brown hair, right?" "Yep, that's her," he continued. "She's retired now, went into market research or something. Works in Connecticut somewhere, maybe New York."

"Did you know her very well, Trip? Well enough to introduce us?"

"Not that well, she was way above my pay grade, but I might be able to arrange something. What's it worth to you?"

Carla bit her lip. What a sleeze. "Fifteen hundred, cash."

"Make it two grand and we got a deal."

"Cripes, that counter offer just 'tripped' off your lips, didn't it?"

He didn't get the pun as he accelerated through traffic and headed over the Ravenel bridge.

"Yeah, I'm pretty quick, Miss... what was it?"

"Carla. Carla D'Andrea. You can drop my name if you like. She might have heard of me."

“You got it. Give me your cell and someone will be in touch.” He dropped them at Carla’s apartment on King Street and pocketed a hundred dollar tip. “Well thanks very much, ladies. A pleasure doing business with you. Maybe the next time I see you I won’t need to spend an afternoon cleaning my cab.” Carla tossed him another fifty and said “Maybe put a towel down next time.”

“Or a tarp,” he said, almost choking at his sterling wit.

“Whatever,” Carla responded, “only next time you probably won’t recognize us.”

“Oh, I’ll recognize your voice and that leggy build of yours, if you’ll pardon me.”

“Don’t push it, farm boy,” she said as the team headed for her elevator.

Back upstairs the women took turns in the shower. An hour and a half later they met in the living room. Joanna grabbed three Heineken bottles and settled into the couch. “Those all for you, teammate?” Sarah just couldn’t resist.

Two rounds later and they were ready to discuss their next moves. All twelve bottles stood at attention on the coffee table.

“Here’s the thing,” Carla began. “We need some executive guidance. I’ve nearly gotten us in the obit section a couple times and I . . .”

String Bean’s voice trailed off. Her lithe 5’8’ runner’s frame slumped back into the couch. Sarah and Joanna gasped and propped her back up. Those electric green eyes flashed at the ceiling before fluttering shut.

Melody's jittery fingers reached for her phone and dialed 911.