

A Story by Jack Sparacino

"The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." — Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

"911, What is your emergency?"

Melody fought to catch her breath. "Oh Jesus help us, *please*. It's our friend. I mean boss. Her name's Carla. We're in her apartment and she just passed out. She seemed fine after a couple beers and then she leaned back on the couch and went blank. We're scared she had a heart attack or something but maybe..."

"Please hold a moment..."

Melody, Sarah and Joanna's own hearts pounded like jack hammers in the hands of a road repair crew. The 30-second delay felt like hours. When the operator came back on she took their address calmly and said she was sending an ambulance. The String Bean squad reached for a blanket and wrapped Carla up. Her eyes were shut, her breathing uneven. Panicked witless they held hands around her. Their eyes clinked like ice cubes then melted to tears.

Seven minutes later the door shook. The pounding was intense. Joanna opened it and ushered in two huge men with a stretcher. "Hello, ma'am, I'm Jason and this is Derek. We're here for Carla." They quickly checked her breathing before strapping her in. "We're taking her to the ER at Roper Saint Francis Hospital. It's too far to MUSC. They'll take good care of her. We'll meet you there."

Derek hovered over Sarah as Jason raced to Roper. She rattled in her rig like dice in a nervous gambler's cup. "Blood pressure 145/100. Pulse 110. Pulse ox 90. Patient's name is Carla D'Andrea. D apostrophe ANDREA. Age 34. Height about 5'8, weight around 125. Breathing labored but steady. Capo Red Knight. Zorba King. We're hauling ass... Roger that. ETA five minutes."

Melody yelled "C'mon, y'all, code red! ¡Apúrate!- ¡Rápido ! - ¡Date prisa!- ¡Apúrale!" They skipped the elevator and flew down the stairs, almost knocking over ancient Rodney the doorman. "Hey what's going..." he started but they were gone. Like buckshot blasted from Melody's gun, they raced to her Mercedes, gassed and ready. The plate read UPPERUS. A snotty lingering kiss off from her younger years, not that there were many. They reached Roper moments after the ambulance and stormed the ER. Sarah took the lead with the first nurse she spotted.

Gail Force, RN, had seen it all, including the pandemic tsunami, but she hadn't heard of String Bean and company. The ladies pounced on her like starving foxes on a rabbit. "Ma'am, excuse us ma'am, did you see where they took Carla D'Andrea? She just came in unconscious." "Excuse me, young ladies, but I've got six patients right now, go ahead and check at the desk." A kindly black woman in her 60's smiled up at them and said Room 20 without needing another word from them.

Room 20 was six doors down, just past the restroom and across from a man screaming for God to take him away. Then "morphine, **morphine!**" Sarah saw a bloody stump poking out from his sheets and kept running. They got to Carla's room and nearly knocked down the nurses' aid. "Calm down, y'all, and take a seat out there somewhere. We've got this." "Easy for you to say, you mother f-," began Sarah before Joanna yanked her arm and told her to shut up.

Still in full panic mode, the ladies made their way to a makeshift waiting room in the ER littered with coffee cups and People magazines. They held each other in check for the longest fifteen minutes of their lives before heading back to Room 20. A young emergency doc was leaning over his patient, smears of heavy pink on his scrubs. He held them back while a skinny young tech named Archie raced in with an automated external defibrillator. Carla's response to the AED was fast. In a few seconds she opened her still electric green eyes. A whoosh filled the room as the ladies and the two men exhaled.

Sarah stayed in the lead. "Did y'all hear back from that cab driver we rode with from Mel's

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place? Get Hurricane Jane Fleetwood's number and call her. NOW. I can't..." The attending nurse began to hush her but it wasn't necessary. Carla took a deep breath and looked around the room. Everything looked white and gauzy, like the smoke from dry ice. Another breath as she struggled to sit up, then lay back quietly.

Joanna peeled off silently and headed for the john. She pulled out her cell phone and called cab driver Trip Jackson, the one who picked them up at Don Lopez's place in Mount Pleasant after it got blown up.

"Hello, Trip? It's Joanna Ciampa, remember me from that ride we took into town the other day?"

"You the mouthy one with the tattoo sleeves and the bandanna? The one who said she was an artist or something?"

"Yeah that's me, but two of us paint. Melody does... forget it. We need a contact number for your old boss, Hurricane Jane ah, Fleetwood. Colonel Fleetwood. Give me her contact information and if it's legit you'll get your money." Something about Joanna, maybe her fierce attractiveness and sass, prompted him to look up Fleetwood's number and business address at Kirk and Winter Associates. Joanna thanked him, got his home address, and told him someone would come by later that day with the two thousand dollar payoff.

She hustled back to Room 20. Carla looked a little better with some color returning to her brave, pretty face. She had an oxygen tube and IV hookup along with a hospital gown printed with tiny flowers. Joanna thought they looked like lilies, Carla's favorite. She took it as a good omen.

Dr. Adam Backer, the attending physician, met with them just outside room 20 and said "She's stable and appears strong underneath it all. We're doing her bloodwork and have her scheduled for a CT scan. She's fairly comfortable and her breathing is better. She said she hadn't felt any chest pains but is still feeling sharp pain shooting down her right leg. We're looking for any clots and will probably give her heparin just in case. You're all welcome to stay with her for a few more minutes but I suggest you go get coffee or maybe out for a walk. We'll call you with any news. Sound fair?"

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The ladies waved kisses to Carla as they left. Sarah “Slingshot” Fiedler wiped a tear away. Her ankles felt like concrete. Joanna reached for her phone, called Hurricane Jane Fleetwood’s office number and held her breath.

“Fleetwood.”

“Hello Jane, uh Colonel. I’m Joanna Ciampa and I work for Carla D’Andrea. We got your number from a guy named Trip Jackson... Yes ma’am, that’s the guy.”

Joanna was getting another call. It was the hospital.