

A Story by Jack Sparacino

Melody Danforth and Carla Ciampa hustled back to Carla “String Bean” D’Andrea’s apartment breathless. They plopped on the couch, looked at each other with goggle eyes. “What’s up, ladies?” began Carla. “You look like you’ve had too much coffee or something.”

“Coffee my butt, boss,” Melody shot back. “We’re jacked like a cuppala cowgirls at their first rodeo. This Hurricane Jane blew our socks off, see?” She showed off her bare ankles, quickly realizing she was being a twit. “It’s like when we first got there I was wearing leggings.”

“OK, I’m getting the idea,” Carla continued. “You liked her. What happened over there? What did she tell you? Did she ask much about me? Did you give her any incriminating details about our operation, I hope the hell not? What’s she like up close? What color eyes does she have? Could she help us in our work? Would you trust your children with her, if you had any? Speak. Please.”

Melody inhaled to her toes. They had to get this straight the first time. She and Joanna took turns recounting their meeting. Carla and Sarah peppered them with more questions as they went along. After twenty minutes Carla said “Time out, girls. I *got* the picture. I’ll follow up with this hurricane woman and we’ll finalize a plan together. All of us, including you two cowgirl windbags. I need a beer. Sa
rah?

And don’t remind me what Dr. Backer said about that. Beer, please.”

Sarah took her time gathering up four Heinekens and some mixed nuts. Four coasters and napkins. She checked her appearance in a reflection from the toaster. Huh. Not bad, she thought. Actually pretty good under the circumstances. She wasn’t exactly sure what those were but they seemed, well, great. What have we got to lose? Yeah, famous last words. Jeez, I could really use one of these beers right now. Maybe we’ll wait on the Planters. We’ve got enough nuts here already.

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Carla continued the debrief, as she called it, with a proposal. “I think Colonel Fleetwood, this ‘Hurricane Jane,’ can really help us. First of all, no more near death experiences, for all of us. Second, I’ll coordinate with her mostly electronically. Like Zoom or FaceTime, something remote and maybe encrypted, I don’t know, jeez I’m sounding paranoid. To the outside world, it’s just two colleagues and friends communicating. Once in a while we’ll meet in a coffee shop. She sounds like the jelly doughnut type to me.”

“We’ll identify a financial target first, say two mil. Then an enterprise target, say another bank-- god forbid-- or art auction. Those can be worth a fortune if you grab the right pieces. Or maybe a drug cartel. No, forget that. Maybe some big box store. You ladies ever go to the Costco in town? Sarah, you must have gone there in your homeless days for the free samples. Sarah? Sarah! *Sweetheart!*”

Sarah Jean Fiedler, age 33, had laid the beers down and slumped in the faux satin wingchair. ‘I’m just like this chair, you guys. Sorta pretty to look at, not all that comfortable to sit in. Stuck in one place. Squishy inside. Fake. Not really satin, not really a chair. More like a...’

“Sarah! Where are you? Are you ok? Talk to us, girlfriend, talk. Slingshot! *Speak!*”

“Don’t yell, you can’t yell like that at someone like me, floating on a faux satin chair. Looking at a lovely Ferris wheel with little jesters in the seats. Maybe Joanna painted them. Each little fellow has his old timey pipe and their little green hats are so cute. Wait... uh-oh. There’s a big ole nasty hawk on top of the wheel. He’s looking down at dogs driving an antique car. Now he’s plucking off the jesters and eating them. Holy mother of god they’re fighting back. They’re...”

Carla, the original steely Carla, remained perfectly still. “Melody, go into the bathroom and grab two Valiums. She can knock them back with her beer. But then no more beer. She’ll be woozy enough. Huh? Yeah, sure, take one yourself but *someone* besides me better stay awake here.”

Sarah drifted into that dreamy smile from Renoir’s *Algerian Woman 1881*. Upturned gaze. Wistful, her right arm over her left shoulder. Sarah thought Carla’s voice was getting less shrill, more like her friend and boss, the great String Bean. Now Mel was here with some pills. They must be vitamins. OK, down the hatch.

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The other ladies stalled nervously. Melody told an off color joke and they all laughed nervously. Then she started another. "See, there were these two slime ball salesmen. Both named Eugene. Big Genie and Teeny Wienie. Not the bottle kind but..."

Sarah slowly morphed from Renoir's painting. "Thank you, ladies, for your patience. We are living in strange times. "*Strange Days*," as the Doors used to sing. I think Carla laid out a well-reasoned, structured plan we can run with. I'd support our targeting opportunities starting lower at a million dollars. Half a mil if we get desperate. No more high explosives. Small, easily concealed weapons only. I love the idea of an art auction

intervention

, shall we say. With our two painters here, Joanna and Melody, that makes sense. They know the weak spots, the dumbest auctioneers with the worst security, the fattest bidders."

The painters gulped, Carla closed her eyes and sighed. "Sarah, my darling friend Slingshot, you're back. No more Ferris wheels and little jesters. You know, I was reading somewhere, New York magazine maybe, that it's fairly normal for a person to hallucinate occasionally. See things that aren't there, hear invisible people. It's like when you dream, your brain is trying to fill in the details from uncertain or incomplete memory fragments. It comes up with these totally bizarre scenes. Sometimes you can recognize the craziness while you're dreaming and snap yourself out of it. Ever have that experience?"

Joanna and Melody sat fixated. No nine to five job, this String Bean work. Neither one wanted to jump on the hallucination thing. Sarah broke their silence.

"When you guys are working the auction, I'll film it. Undercover, of course, no huge cameras and dollies from a 1930's musical. No 42nd Street or Top Hat. No way. Although maybe we could work up to those rigs. Assuming our budget would allow it. I think I should go to film school in Los Angeles. Get embedded with a dance company. Like a spy almost. Find out if they have connections with the movie studio bigshots. I hate those guys, with their five jillion dollar suits and their diamond crusted cigarette lighters..."

Carla took a big breath and exhaled slowly. "Whoa, Sarah, slow down. You're getting a little ahead of us. I'm going to get back on the phone with Hurricane Jane, uh, Ms. Fleetwood. Recalibrate our strategy a little."

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Carla stared at her artists, Joanna and Melody. “Ok ladies, let’s paint our way out of this one. Call that Dr. Backer from the hospital and this shrink I know, McCracken. We’re not hitting up anyone until this plane wreck, our girl Slingshot, comes back again. Any questions?”

Jo and Mel fidgeted, then reached for their beers. Joanna was thinking about nuts.