

Face the Music

Written by Jack Sparacino

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A Short Story by Jack Sparacino

Morning mist rose like fetid cigar smoke from Charleston's rivers, creeks and harbor. Indoor sanctuaries beckoned. Clicks, squeaks and scuffling resonated off the shiny floors at Bohicket Marina Village mall. Saleswomen stood sentry at their stations, bored senseless by the stream of customers trudging through. The ladies' paltry wages weren't enough to afford them their preferred surgery.

Five thousand out of pocket bought you facial glory that was good enough to fool anybody, even those who fixate on trivial flaws. Laugh lines, crow's feet, small moles, scars. Five grand to look great or phony. Game show ready.

Sisyphus "Skip" Bleeker had the surgery in his late 30's. It hurt to breathe or sip a soda afterward. Laughter was tortuous. He lay anesthetized during the procedure but his face exploded in fire after the Ketamine wore off. Thousands of fire ants lacerated his eyes, nose, cheeks and mouth. The doctors offered him pain medicine, but it scared Skip like the plague. The fear of becoming addicted rose like a rabid hyena within him. His brother Vince got himself hooked on fentanyl before he could spell it. Increasingly gutsy heists were needed to satisfy the beast. Skip was sympathetic but jumpy about Vince's plight. He watched in anguish as Vince Bleeker planned to hijack a truck full of used washing machines. He got nearly \$50 apiece for the better specimens. Not the worst way for Vince to satisfy his addiction, Skip figured.

Skip sat between jobs while he continued to recover from surgery. Working as an office manager had been rewarding for a while, but he quit to become a concierge at one of the finest

hotels in town, Belmond Charleston Place. He loved to gab with the bellhops and the occasional chatty customer. The kitchen staff was even more fun. Perfect cheese burgers, shrimp dishes and gumbo coursed through the hotel's bloodstream. Buddy, sous-chef and gumbo specialist, sporting a black pencil mustache, sometimes slipped Skip a "sample" or two. Or three. After a joint in the parking garage at odd hours that gumbo was heaven.

Time clicked by. Skip's mother Dorothy suffered prematurely wrinkled skin in her 40's and it only got worse as the lines turned into dried riverbeds. She fought the good fight with caky makeup and dark restaurants but it was a losing battle. When Skip started to notice early wrinkles in his 10x mirror he grew edgy and then panicked. His face and social manner were his calling cards with the public, staff and management. Where was it going? No one else he knew had his mother's condition, though Buddy's emphysema was getting out of control and his manager's cholesterol was sky high. Too many of those luscious burgers washed down with chocolate milkshakes maybe.

Skip bit the bullet and consulted with a surgeon about the anti-wrinkle procedure he heard about. Olay ads were enticing but he noticed that the models with the flawless creamy skin looked barely 20 years old. What hype, he concluded. Three weeks later he lay in bed with the ants eating his face again. His twist tie thin girlfriend Holly held his hand and secretly slipped him some pain medication, ground up in his gumbo. When he mumbled about the off-flavor, being a gumbo expert and all, she said Buddy was trying out some different spices and added skate wings to the recipe. Skip wasn't necessarily buying that but as the drug took hold his grousing faded in a dreamy, soul satisfying stupor.

Skip left Buddy and the grand hotel to work at Charlie Bing's Audi dealership. Selling luxury cars came naturally to him. Customers loved his youthful appearance and sunny smile. He seemed to anticipate their needs and soft spots for German engineering. Said they might have won the war had their top engineers run it instead of that paranoid Austrian. Sales soared as Skip set new records. He helped himself often to the showroom's coffee and doughnuts. Not too many doughnuts, just enough to keep the caffeine buzz going. He bagged some of their promotional t-shirts, sports coats, key rings, whatever he could lay his hands on. Skip felt especially confident with customers when he wore one of those snappy blue jackets.

Within a couple years Skip's face rebelled on him again. Premature liver spots and shaggy eyebrows descended like that Charleston fog. Customers seemed to smile at him less and chat more superficially, or was that his imagination? His manager pointed out calmly that his sales had slipped lately and encouraged him to take a class at a local college to re-motivate him. Skip felt he had plenty of motivation but suffered through the class anyway, "Better Sales Through a

New You!" *Olé!*

Telling no one, he scheduled more work on his face. And his hands, which were also beginning to sprout liver spots. Holly told him to relax, have a martini with her and share some dinner at their favorite sushi place, Fugi. She reminded him of a grotesque *Twilight Zone* (maybe the single season

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ay Out

) TV show episode where an artist took a painting of his lover's face and slowly made her into hag while his own face became more youthful in proportion. No matter. Two martinis later he made up his mind. He went for additional surgery. High tech facial scrubbing, eye lifts, eyebrow implants. They changed his eyes from brown to blue to complete the glorious makeover, straightened his distinctive nose and strengthened his chin.

This time he skipped his opioid fear and crashed right in. Vince and Holly had connections and got him plenty of oxycodone. He inhaled them two or three at a time, usually with a martini or at least a couple beers if they were out of gin. It felt good. He looked in the mirror and began to see a customer's dream. A 45-year-old man who looked 30. Holly claimed she could hardly see the stitches.

Then came more dermabrasion, a full body wax and hair plugs. Two surgical procedures later, Skip started to slide. Recovering again in the hospital, the young nurses called him Skippy. An 11-year-old cancer patient from down the hall wandered into his room. Bald as a peeled onion, pale and skinny but cheerful. Sonny, they called him. The kid freaked out when he got close to Skip, screeched in terror. Skip jerked himself out of bed, threw on a gown and ran down the hall trailing his saline drip and pain med tubes, blood leaking from his arm. The sky was state fair sunny outside, pinwheel clouds drifting by. He bought a pumpkin spice mocha at Starbucks, laced it with a couple shots of Grey Goose from the package store next door, and headed for the park. Nothing could stop him now.

Three palm trees hung lovingly over Skip's bench. He caught his breath and felt a hand on his shoulder. "Mom?" "Hi, sweetie, my best little Skippy. You look great, son, so young and innocent. Can I put a bandage on your arm?" "That's okay, Mom, it's just blood. Want some coffee?" She vaporized without answering. The oxy was tweaking his brain, he figured, maybe the booze and loss of blood frolicked at the same party. Skip started to put a bucket list together. Dancing a tango to a tiny orchestra in Paris with Holly was first.

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Suicide was second.