

*John Ingrisano*

**Daughters of an Abandoned Civilization**

**T**hough men would come to Cat's Tavern in the seedy part of the city to get drunk and buy a whore on Saturday night, some wanted to get home in time for church on Sunday morning. They would then spend the rest of the day of rest dozing in front of the television while the wife made Sunday dinner and nervously shushed the children, saying, "Don't disturb your father ; he needs his rest."

Eduardo also noticed that some of the girls did not go to bed Sunday morning, or if they did, they only slept a few hours. He saw them leave Cat's together. He almost didn't recognize them the first time he had caught a glimpse of them heading out the door. They had washed off their garish makeup and strong perfume. They had also replaced their working clothes – tight skirts, long wigs, short shorts, lace and leather lingerie, and high high heels -- with muted and modest, calf-length dresses that carried a faint odor of mothballs. Some wore hats or veils in the old Catholic tradition. What made Eduardo curious was how the girls quietly talked and giggled excitedly in hushed, carefree tones as they moved together down the street. They didn't look at all like whores, he thought.

Led by Shakiira, who was deep black and a head taller and a hundred pounds heavier than the others, they walked in a small, tight flock the four blocks to Queen of Peace Cathedral. The dirty Sunday morning streets were nearly empty. The odor of vomit still lingered on the hosed-down sidewalks and a few bleary-eyed drunks and addicts were huddled in doorways.

"Why they always men?" Shakiira asked aloud one week, hiking up her ankle-length kaftan to step over a snoring man. None of them answered. They were always men. That was just how it was, how it had always been, they assumed. There was something in them, something inside those wrinkled pouches that hung between their legs, something that drove them to fight and to fuck and to destroy everyone around them and, finally, themselves. They were men. That was the only answer. They were not like women.

It was also rumored that once upon a time women, especially mothers, had had a civilizing influence on men. But that had been once upon a time, and it was just a rumor.

The man's pockets had been turned out, and he lay sprawled across the sidewalk, one sleeve soaking in the gutter. Shakiira shook her head sadly. Surrounding the man, the girls looked down at the man. Shakiira took a scented handkerchief from her purse. She bent down beside the unconscious man and tenderly wiped spittle from the corner of his mouth. After a moment, she straightened and, without a word, turned and continued leading the girls to the Cathedral.

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Eduardo was intrigued by Shakiira, as were most of the men. When they first saw her, they assumed that, because of her size, she was awkward and clumsy. They were wrong. Rippling with muscles, she was

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fast, like a jungle cat. She had hard, broad facial features and large, manly hands. She spoke rarely, except to herself or to Candy, the tongue-less bartender. She and Candy shared the small back room behind the bar, off the kitchen.

Some people said she had once been a world-class body builder. Others said she had once been a man. Still others said she still was. All agreed she was dangerous. Even Ryan, who managed Cat's for Mr. Renaldi, was grateful that Shakiira gave him no reason to have to talk to her.

At Cat's, Shakiira always wore tight black leather shorts, a tight black bustier, and huge gold earrings. She kept her cornrowed hair in a dew-rag scarf. There was nothing dainty or feminine about her. She had a swagger like a man and a thick, whiskey voice. She never made the rounds of the tables like the other girls, who giggled and flirted and draped their arms seductively around the men's shoulders. Instead, she sat alone at the bar, with one black-booted heel crooked on the rung of the stool, her legs open like a man's. Candy kept a whiskey bottle and shot glass in front of her at the bar. From her barstool, she studied the customers as they came by, showing no enthusiasm or recognition even for the regulars who bought her every week.

Rumor had it that she charged double what the other girls did, and she never spent the night alone. She always gave Ryan everything she was paid and received her share from him without complaint. In turn, Ryan always counted her money twice to make sure he did not short her.

One muscular young fellow, a new customer, full of himself and too much whiskey, had once decided to take offense at Shakiira's indifference. He sauntered across the barroom and looked her up and down contemptuously. Her flat, dead eyes looked at him before she turned to refill her shot glass. Pretending not to watch, Candy tilted his right shoulder and put his hand on the taped handle of the club hidden below the bar.

"Hey, Lola, you are one big lady?" The drunk paused and smirked. Shakiira had heard many times references, mostly whispered, comparing her to the transvestite from The Kinks's song, "Lola." If it bothered her, she never showed it.

"You are a woman, aren't you?" the drunk persisted and then waited. Ryan appeared and watched from the edge of the alcove he referred to as The Office. "Hey, bitch, you the real thing?" the drunk demanded loudly, losing patience. Ignoring him, Shakiira idly scratched her inner thigh and watched another customer walk by.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" the drunk snarled. "I asked you a question. Are you the real thing? I don't think you are." He grabbed Shakiira by the arm and stepped in close to feel her large breasts. Without a warning or any cocked-fist windup, Shakiira hit him full in the face. The blow shattered his nose and sent him flailing helplessly across the room. He landed on the floor, and other customers scattered to avoid being bowled down. Then, with the same dull expression, Shakiira glanced at Ryan and then turned to her whiskey.

The drunk, blood running from his nose and onto his shirt, struggled to his feet and pulled a switchblade from his pocket. Pointing the handle

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at her, he dramatically pushed the button, snapping the shiny blade in place.

"Maybe you'd like some of this?" he threatened with a smug leer. He looked around at the other customers, but he got no approval, and his expression began to falter. Shakiira's broad back remained turned to him. Looking more hesitant, he began marching toward her. When he was within close striking distance, she turned and glanced first at the knife and then into his face. He stopped.

"Put it away, little man," she said flatly. She took the knife out of his hand, stabbed it forcefully into the top of the bar and snapped off the blade. Then she stood up, towering over the man, grabbed his belt, and pulled him close. His eyes grew large with fear.

"You a mess," she said, sighing, and held his face up to examine the damage she had done to his nose. Candy threw a bar towel across the counter. Shakiira picked it up and, almost tenderly, dabbed the man's bloody face. Her expression never changed.

Ryan shrugged and went back into the office.

"Oh, by da way, I be the real ting, little man," she said quietly, without anger or passion, "and I teach you a ting or two. You wanna stick me wit som-tin. Less you and me go upstairs and see what you got. Maybe we have a little give 'n take." Still holding him by the belt, Shakiira marched him upstairs like he was a petulant child being put to bed. Candy saw him slink down the stairs and out the door four hours later.

After that, he came by Cat's Tavern at least once a week and waited for an opportunity to approach Shakiira.

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Shakiira never smiled and only spoke when it seemed she absolutely had to. Violence seemed to sadden her. That Sunday morning, walking away from the drunk on the sidewalk, she offered what was for her a long speech: "Anger be a powerful weapon, mo powerful dan violence. Da problem be that both be wrong, all wrong. It kill you faster than it kill da one you wanna kill."

They turned the corner and, in front of them, taking up a whole city block, with broad, sweeping steps, stood Queen of Peace Cathedral.

The huge old church must once have been impressive, a place where bishops and governors and wealthy women wearing flowing gowns and white gloves had arrived in gaily festooned horse-drawn carriages. Today, the old structure was sad and dilapidated, with trash on the steps and graffiti spray-painted on the thick stone walls and massive metal doors.

Inside, a layer of dust and dirt covered everything, and broken glass crunched underfoot. The pews, once stained a dark walnut, were chipped and scarred where lovers had carved their initials. Some of the pews sagged or were broken down completely. The recessed alcoves, where life-size statues and small side altars had once stood, were empty, except for blown newspapers and other trash. A portion of the roof had caved in, and pigeons and barn swallows nested in the high rafters.

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At the front and looking completely out of place, a chain-link fence enclosed the apse, the large domed main alcove where the altar sat. Behind the fence, several darkened tapestries hung limply on the rear wall. Two brass candle sticks sat on the altar, which was covered by a white, wine-stained linen. To the side and almost against the fence, a chipped, twelve-foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Peace, stood on a low pedestal. Her carved robes were light blue, and her arms were extended, palms up, in perpetual beckoning. Though a portion of the nose was missing, her expression, looking through the wires of her cage, was serene and loving, almost humorous.

The fence rose twenty feet and then swept back to the rear wall. It resembled a baseball field backstop. With the altar at home plate, the congregation sat in the bleachers. High above the altar, where the fence swept over and toward the back wall, a short two-by-four beam and one sneaker sat atop the chain link.

A small chain-link door was at the center of the fence, at the top of the center aisle. Before the service, the priest, nervously scanning the handful of people in the pews, flipped back his sleeve, hunted for the key inside his vestments, and loudly unlocked the door. Apparently there were no altar boys to do the job.

Eduardo had followed them that one time, half out of curiosity, to see what they were up to at this hour on a Sunday morning. As the women had entered the cathedral, he noticed, their expressions began to change. They became focused, serious, reverent, gentle. Except for Shakiira, they sat side by side, together in a pew off to the left side, way in the back. A hushed and ancient silence filled the dim, unlit structure. As they settled into their seats, one of the girls had brushed an empty wine bottle with her foot. The sound echoed loudly as the bottle rolled noisily away on the marble floor. Standing in the shadows behind a chipped marble pillar, Eduardo had watched curiously as the women bowed their heads.

Some sobbed quietly and prayed, murmuring, "Lord have mercy," over and over, slightly rocking. When they looked up toward the statue of Jesus hanging on the cross above the altar, their eyes glistened and smiled.

Shakiira walked all the way up to the fence and sat in the front pew, directly in front of the statue of the Queen of Peace. Like visiting day at a prison, separated by the fence, the whore and the Virgin Mother looked into each other's eyes. Shakiira's expression remained flat, but her left eyebrow was cocked just slightly, and her lips were pursed, as if she and Mary were sharing a private joke.

There were enough pews for perhaps a thousand people. However, except for the women and a few derelicts sleeping in the pews, fewer than 50 other worshipers were scattered about. Off to the right side, in the dimmest part of the cathedral, a thin boy in rags and a dirt-smudged face entered a pew and nervously scooted toward the middle. A few minutes later, an older man stopped at the pew, genuflected and crossed himself before going in and sitting next to the boy. Without a word, the boy lay back and cocked his left leg over the back of the pew. The older man tugged open the boy's zipper. Intent and anxious, he didn't seem to notice that the sound resonated throughout the cathedral. He fumbled about

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before pausing, and his head disappeared into the boy's crotch. The boy closed his eyes; his arms were raised limply about his head, his fingers nestled in his hair. Except for a reflexive bob of his Adam's apple every few seconds, he did not move. When done, the man stood and dropped some bills on the boy's chest before walking away, leaving the boy alone, his pants still open.

When the bell rang signaling the start of the service and the priest entered from a side room off the altar, the women stood. Eduardo continued to study the expressions on their faces for a few more minutes. He knew he had learned all he would learn here. He had no opinion either way about religion or God. He looked back at the women and studied them. Their eyes were bright, and their faces were relaxed and gentle, with faint, peaceful smiles.

This was a harmless pastime, Eduardo concluded. If it kept the whores working the other six days a week, it was a good tool. Still, he felt a little unsettled, and he didn't know why. He headed for the vestibule and the heavy, greenish-bronze metal doors. The sound of his heels clicking loudly on the broken glass and marble floor tiles helped reassure him.

As he left, he brushed past a man with his wife and two daughters hurrying inside. They were late for the service. Eduardo recognized the man. He had been with the girl they called Sindy the night before, and the man had been loud and drunk.

Surprised at seeing Eduardo this morning at the Cathedral, the man ducked his head and turned his shoulder away. He ushered his wife and daughters into the church. Eduardo paused and smiled and doffed his hat to the wife. When he got to the door, he turned to study the man's daughters, who were perhaps twelve and fourteen years old, about the same age as Sindy. The girls were pretty, with innocent smiles. They wore meticulously white lace dresses and white shoes and anklets. Wouldn't they be proud if they knew how their papa spent his Saturday nights, Eduardo thought to himself. He sighed with satisfaction. The world made sense to him again.

As the family blessed themselves with holy water, the man looked back. He saw Eduardo admiring his daughters. Smiling broadly, Eduardo nodded in the direction of the girls, as if to say, "Nice. Very nice."

Eduardo pushed through the heavy door into the bright sunlight and slowly walked back to Cat's Tavern. The family would probably sit toward the front of the church, far away from Shakiira and the other whores.