

A TALE OF TWO BUFFETTS

I.

“Todd Barrel?”

“Yes.”

“This is Jimmy Buffett.”

“So?”

“So, I want you to come down to Margaritaville. I think I have something that might be of interest to you.”

“I don’t know how you got this number—”

“Todd, there’s a great deal of money involved.”

“Keep talking.”

“But we have to meet face to face. And soon.”

“Jimmy, right now I’m shooting skeet off the Sultan of Brunei’s yacht in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It’s gonna take some time for me to get over there.”

“I know. I’ve sent a seaplane that should rendezvous with you at approximately 23 hundred hours.”

“This is really not my style—”

“Trust me. You won’t be disappointed.”

I guess it only takes a few words to get old Todd Barrel to fly halfway around the world. That’s exactly what I was thinking as I slammed Coronas on the seaplane. The facts made me look like a chump, but I had a special feeling about this one.

The seaplane landed smoothly and taxied to a dock where two Haitian bodyguards, Laurence and Philippe, met me and took my bags. They brought me up to a blue and yellow sea shack and asked me to get settled. Jimmy would be there soon. The accommodations were nice enough—tennis court, blender, helipad—but something was amiss. I picked up the telephone beside the bed and a foreign voice came through the receiver.

“Hallå, Verkställande Todd. Hur hjälp med att lösa en uppgift?”

“No thank you, I’m very capable of bathing myself.”

“Bra, farväl.”

“What was that?”

Click.

The Swedes are a testy bunch whose socialist tendencies make for strong unions. The Swedish Brotherhood of Telephone Operators must have made a power move out here in Margaritaville and monopolized the telecom services. The only other explanation was that I wasn't in Margaritaville and my number might soon be up. Just then I heard a knock at the door.

I slowly walked over to the door, fingered my Bowie knife and unlatched the lock. The species of Buffett that stood before me was the kind who plays the calculator instead of the guitar. It was the Oracle of Omaha himself, Warren Buffett.

The camera puts on twenty pounds and to my surprise, Warren Buffett was very slender and delicate. I'd almost say he was childlike if not for the tracksuit and large scimitar hanging from his belt.

“Todd.”

“Oracle.”

“Jimmy was tied up at the marina, so I came down to greet you instead.”

“Level with me, Buffett. Am I in Margaritaville?”

“No, you're not.”

“Am I in Sweden?”

“Not exactly.”

At that moment I drew my knife, swiveled around him Ninja-style, and de-escalated the situation with my trademark Apache chokehold.

“Out with it, money bags.”

“You're choking me.”

“Damn right, chuckles.”

“Mo Lester.”

“Are you calling me what I think you are?”

“Impress her.”

“Impress who?”

“Investor.”

“What?”

“We want you to be an investor.”

When Warren Buffett starts yapping about cash, a man had best loosen his chokehold and listen up. I released the billionaire and stripped him of his sword.

“You have twenty seconds, B. Make it good or say your prayers.”

“You are on the island of Saint Marguerite, off the coast of France, in the heart of the Riviera.”

“Lies like that are gonna land you in a pine box, four eyes.”

“It's no lie. I bought it. Chump change, really.”

“Big freaking deal.”

“I've partnered with the other Buffett because of his expertise in tropical marketing. You see, Todd, you are standing on what will be the Margaritaville Condos and Planned Community Resort Conference Center.”

“I'm listening.”

“All these ramshackle 16th century chateaux will be bulldozed in two weeks to make way for the

master plan.”

“Why do you need me?”

“We want to build a Cracker Barrel theme park. We want you to be our partner. It’s a \$20 million buy in.”

Epiphanies don’t come like clockwork every morning after a cup of coffee and a cigarette. They’re rare birds that must be captured and fed. I had one at that moment and saw the world’s tallest rollercoaster with a huge neon Cracker Barrel sign, blinking like a beacon of freedom in the night. I saw weary Frenchmen with morsels of cheese falling from their dropped jaws as they gazed across the waters to view the raw power of the Cracker Barrel theme park.

“I’ve seen the light, Oracle.”

“I am delighted.”

II.

Twenty-four hours later, I flew into Houston’s George Bush International Airport with a rucksack and a dream. As I drove through the tony River Oaks neighborhood, memories of my youth kept spilling over me like the warm breast milk of my Mexican nanny, Conchita. I saw the tennis courts where I learned how to volley, the four star restaurants where I learned how to humiliate the sommelier and haystacks where I would play Bishop with the likes of Lacy, Stacy, Parker and Boots O’Callahan.

My mother greeted me as she always did when I would return home from school.

“Won’t you fix mummy a cocktail, Todd?”

“Won’t you separate yourself from that Margarita I-V, Mums?”

We had a laugh and asked the help to embrace for us. Tequila shots were had all around. For an ex-British downhill ski champion, Mother was still spry yet brittle from a lack of nutrition. Many years back, she had given up cooked food for a diet of popcorn, Gummi Bears and cocktails. Doctors had predicted she’d die long ago but she had proved them wrong by sustaining herself on the vitamin content of her mixers.

“Why are you here, Todd?”

“I’m here to get the childhood I never had...and some money from Father.”

“You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Your father is in a coma, Todd.”

“When did this happen?”

“Two months ago. We didn’t know where you were.”

“I’ve been relaxing on the Sultan’s yacht. Remember? I left that message...and the number?”

“Todd, the only numbers I remember are Texas Lotto.”

“How did he—”

“How do you think? He was at Lucy Ming’s. That bitch.”

“Of course. What’s happening with Cracker Barrel? Who’s running the show?”

“Uncle Jack.”

“Mother, I am the rightful heir to Cracker Barrel.”

“Todd, there’s nothing I can do. The lawyers...they just fixed me cocktail after cocktail and asked me to sign a piece of paper. I thought it was the bar tab at the country club.”

“Nice work, Mums.”

III.

Like I said before, Uncle Jack harbors some serious resentment towards our side of the family. He’d do anything to get his fat little paws on our cheese grit fortune. My uncle possesses no creativity. He does, however, possess an uncanny ability to make scads of money. Both he and my father enjoy this Barrel genetic gift. I was lucky that I inherited my mother’s alcoholism instead. Otherwise I’d be working all day to support a nasty yacht habit.

So, you see my dilemma. There was no choice but to head straight to the Astrodome. That’s where you could find Uncle Jack on most summer afternoons.

When my cab dropped me off at the Astrodome, I noticed something, or someone, strange. There was a delightful young girl in hot pants and sweatbands, roller-skating next to a boom box playing an old Ton Loc hit. She moved seductively with her caramel body and flashed her luscious thighs—the kind you could sink your teeth into for about a week. Every once in a while she would stop to take a sip of Diet Coke and snap pictures of me with a telescopic lens. I was on a tight schedule to make millions of dollars so I didn’t have time to go over and lay the Barrel on thick.

If you’ve ever been to Houston in the summer, you know that it is hot as hell. Uncle Jack likes to dove hunt in the summer months and finds it more comfortable to do it in the Astrodome, cooled by one of the world’s largest air conditioners. The visitors’ locker room is stocked with South Texas dove that are released at various intervals or when Jack shouts, “Pull!” or “Birds up!”

“Uncle Jack!”

“It’s fowl time, boy. No chit-chat!”

“I need to have a word with you.”

“Grab a shotgun, son. If you can’t run with the big dogs, then stay on the porch, puppy dick. Pull!”

One of Jack’s lackeys handed me a nice, side-by-side Holland and Holland with scenes of fornicating groundhogs carved into the stock. The Sultan has a similar model but I don’t dare say what’s carved into his. A bloody dove fell to the fifty-yard line.

“Nice shot.”

“Goddamn right, Todd. Don’t be such a pussy. Shoot something. Birds Up!”

I fired off the 20-gauge with deadly precision. Two shells. Two dove.

“Damn, boy. You always were a good shot.”

“I’m the fucking best.”

“Tell me, Todd, what’s on your mind?”

“I have a business proposition for you, Uncle Jack.”

Just then he winged one around the end zone that bounced down on the Astroturf, half alive. A lackey trotted over to snap its neck.

“Jack, it’s a surefire deal. A winner.”

“I like winners.”

“I need twenty million dollars.”

“That ain’t chump change, Todd. But you could probably blow that in a weekend at a Korean whorehouse.”

“It’s different this time. I’m in with Warren Buffett and Jimmy Buffett.”

Uncle Jack dropped the gun to his side and looked at me seriously.

“This ain’t no bullshit, Todd?”

“True as tits. The Buffetts want me on board.”

“Tell you what...I’ll give you the cash.”

“You don’t want to know the specifics?”

“First, you gotta do a little favor for me. I need someone who I can trust.”

“Jack, you can trust me.”

“You know that I have many side business ventures, Todd—real estate, horse racing, NASCAR.”

“Your #26, Chris Russel, on the Crate & Barrel Team is in dead last place.”

“It’s a tax write-off, Todd. Anyway, I have some powerful friends who live in the Middle East. These old boys love themselves white women but don’t have much time to date.”

“There’s no JDate in Jordan?”

“There’s no JDate in Jordan and no eHarmony in Qatar. I sometimes provide a service to these old boys by transporting beautiful ladies from certain Eastern European States to certain Middle Eastern States.”

“Forgive me for asking, but isn’t this called white slavery?”

“Todd, Todd, Todd. ‘War,’ ‘Liberation,’ ‘Slavery,’ ‘Dating.’ It’s all semantics. Don’t worry about it. You’ll be giving these young women the chance of a lifetime.”

“You could look at it that way.”

“I want you to go to Yemen and meet with an associate of mine, Mustafa. He will fill you in on the details. And when you return, I’ll have the \$20 million waiting for the Buffetts.”

IV.

Uncle Jack’s mission called for provisions and that called for a visit to Boutros Puchachos.

Boutros Puchachos, a.k.a “The Boutros,” is a Mexican national who made his way up from petty banditry to being one of the most corrupt energy consultants in the world—Horatio Alger on peyote. The Boutros has a soft spot for illicit weaponry, Bolivian marching powder and sketchy oil deals. He and I first met whoring throughout Mexico during my ‘lost years’ with Red Bull. Ours is an indelible friendship forged over cheap tequila and even cheaper prostitutes.

I made my way up to Boutros Inc., high above the Houston skyline in the penthouse of the Penzoil Building. His offices were buzzing with commodities traders, hot secretaries and political spin-

doctors. In addition to brokering deals for African strong-men, The Boutros ran a wildly successful hip-hop label, Road Helmet Records, which was the toast of the town and all the rage with the kids.

Two 300-pound black centurions wearing Houston Rockets jerseys and diamond teeth guarded the doors to The Boutros' office. It was the MAC-10 machine guns draped across their chests rather than their prodigious size that made you want to shit your pants. Even though I had graced those doors innumerable times, they still patted me down like consummate professionals. The Boutros greeted me.

“Todd!”

“Boutros!”

“What’s shakin’, baby?”

“Same old shit, been out on the Sultan’s yacht the past few months.”

“All play and no work makes Todd a suntanned son of a bitch.”

“Can’t complain.”

“Todd, what can I do for you? Sorry to be short but I’ve gotta be on a private jet to Africa in about twenty minutes. For as fucked up as that continent is, they’re pretty punctual.”

“Right. I’m putting together a deal with Uncle Jack and it requires travel. And travel requires weaponry.”

“Todd, don’t get involved with your Uncle Jack. Last year he fucked me on that Alaskan oil deal and sent a team of mercenaries to shoot my lumberjacks guarding the pipeline. My client, Ecuador, lost its shirt and sent the country’s economy into freefall.”

“Boutros, I know. But if I get this deal done, I’ll be rich.”

The Boutros’s satellite phone rang with the signature Road Helmet ringtone.

“Boutros here-...What the fuck do you expect me to do?...No can do, Gregory, I’m in Cote D’Ivoire for the next three days...Well, conventional wisdom would dictate that you break the fucking strike with fucking strike breakers...What?...Don’t fuck this up Greg or Brazil will be so far up my ass, I’ll be shitting Samba for weeks.”

The Boutros hung up, angry.

“Sorry, Todd, what do need from me?”

“The usual.”

“Right, I’ll have Sandra send it over. What hotel are you staying at?”

“I’m at my Mom’s house.”

“Jesus, Todd. Will you hurry up and stop being so poor?”

“Working on it, Boutros.”

“Well, work on it harder!”

V.

When I returned home my mother was predictably watching QVC and chain smoking.

“A package came for you, Todd.”

“Where is it?”

“I gave it to Jorge.”

Five years ago, my father made some enemies in Russia who began to send us beautifully wrapped explosives. Two butlers later, my mother insisted that all packages be X-rayed before entering the house. Our gardener, Jorge, had sent my package through the X-ray machine in the pool house and left it on my bed. It had passed the test.

The package was a brown leather briefcase with the initials C.M.G.T. stenciled on a gold plate above the handle. It was a gift from Charles McArthur Ghankay Taylor, the ex-president for life of Liberia. Inside the case were the goodies—two hand-carved ivory Uzi machine guns, master-crafted and incredibly lethal. I was almost ready.

My last order of business was to give a call to A.Q. Chiachfeld, a dear friend who has saved my life more than once. He is an exiled English aristocrat who devotes himself to the fine arts of chemistry and snowshoeing in his adopted country of Switzerland. Chiachfeld had a Marc Rich moment back in the late 1990’s and began living in Marc Rich’s seven thousand square foot garage apartment outside Geneva. His days are steeped in science and his evenings are passed quietly in the salon of the Marquis de Gymbeaux, basking in the harmonies of the harpsichord or playing backgammon with a Moroccan Count. I called.

“Chiachfeld here.”

“Todd Barrel.”

“Todd, how are you, old chap?”

“Blowin’ and goin’.”

“Still in Sumatra?”

“No, H-Town, TX.”

“Back home?”

“Actually, I’m leaving this evening and I’d like you to join me on a little adventure.”

“I don’t know, I have an important experiment I’m in the middle of. Trying to isolate the psychoactive agent in sizzurp and mix it with Horny Goat Weed.”

“The Boutros would be interested in that.”

“Who do you think is funding it?”

“Right. Chiachfeld, I need your help.”

“I guess I could take a few days off. Where should I meet you?”

“Best Western Hadda Hotel, Sana’a, Yemen.”

“Yemen?”

“Yeah, man. Yemen.”

I hung up the phone and pulled out my old duffel. What to pack for Yemen? It’s a question many a man had pondered. Cigarettes, underwear, scotch, The Rubberist, fountain pen and Uzis. Done.

I made it through the airport with no difficulty and sat back in the first-class cabin of Yemenia Airlines. Goat was on the menu that evening. I knew this because I could hear them crying underneath in steerage.

My ride from the Sana’a airport was uneventful. The Land Rover was dusty and the only programs on the radio were prayer loops from the local Imam. I checked into my room and laid down for a catnap.

Chiachfeld rang about a half hour later and came up to my room. We had a glass of scotch and he told me about his awful flight. The goat was chewy and the burkaed woman next to him wouldn't stop screaming until he put away his nudie photos of Twiggy and Victoria Beckham. We heard a knock at the door.

It was Mustafa. He looked about as Western as a Koran-thumping jihadist but surprisingly, he spoke better English than most residents of New Jersey.

“Hello, Mr. Barrel. I am Mustafa.”

“Come on in, Mustafa. Have a seat on the bed. Would you like a cocktail? Altoid?”

“No, thank you. Your uncle said you would be alone.”

“Don't sweat it, Mustafa. This is A.Q. Chiachfeld. He'll be helping me on this job and should know everything. A consummate professional, he is.”

A.Q. didn't really help this last statement as he was downing scotch from a Pyrex tube and mouthing the words to “Dancing Machine” that was playing through his headphones.

“Chiachfeld.”

I tapped on his shoulder.

“Chiachfeld!”

He turned and noticed our dark Arab friend.

“Hello there, old chap. A.Q. Chiachfeld.”

“Mustafa.”

“It's a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine. May Allah cry opal tears upon your happiness.”

“And yours.”

“Touché. And now, gentlemen, I will pass on the information your uncle has given me. You are to rendezvous with Saudi Prince Bando al Faisal in the oasis of Dakresh. It is two hundred kilometers from here. I shall take you.”

Just then, two svelte ninjas rappelled through the window, sending glass everywhere and throwing jump kicks our direction. Upon closer inspection, these ninjas were actually killer women in burkas, or women in killer burkas, if you care about fashion and such. Mustafa looked like he could handle himself but we lost him quickly to a Chinese star to the face. Blood gushed everywhere and it was a good thing I was wearing my Gore Tex blazer. Chiachfeld grabbed his throwing knives and went right into action, going for their one weakness—modesty. He sliced and diced like a Hong Kong tailor until the woman's clothes had all but disappeared and rendered her more exposed than a Barely Legal model—a hairy one at that. She dashed off, covering her privates in shame. One remained.

I dusted off my briefcase, popped open the lock and decided to give this bitch a taste of American ivory. The Uzis sang and my bullets flew. She was no more.

“Chiachfeld, let’s get the fuck out of this place before the religious police come and throw us underneath the stadium.”

“Right-O. I’ve got a Mercedes gassed up downstairs.”

We rushed down the fire exit of the Best Western while the Yemenerales headed up. Quickly, we hopped in a black S65 AMG Desert Edition with collapsible Bedouin tents and optional harem drive.

“Todd, it’s 200 kilometers to Dakresh, we’ve got a thermos full of goat’s milk, half a sheet of acid and we’re wearing blood-stained safari gear.”

“Hit it.”

VI.

Fast-forward through 48 hours of Chiachfeld and myself tripping our balls off, trying to find a decent radio station and hitting a camel at 140 mph. Thank God those Germans make good cars. We were now safely ensconced at the Dakresh Oasis Intercontinental, deep in the Yemeni desert. The Dakresh Oasis was not just a physical oasis with fresh water and late night billiards, it was a cultural oasis as well. When in times of conservative, fundamentalist governance, every nation has a place where people can think and love freely. Dakresh is to Yemen what San Francisco was to the U.S. in the sixties—a decadent island where misfits debauch themselves under the guise of some thin philosophy of civil disobedience. It was paradise.

The women cruised around braless while reading Ginsberg, Kerouac and Grisham. Sitar players serenaded orgy-goers. Opium eaters wandered listlessly. Condom dispensers went untouched. Days just seemed to float by as we waited for this Prince Bando al Faisal. Most evenings I would get hopped up on amyl nitrate and walk through the desert, composing poetry on Arabic mathematics and other scholarly subjects.

It was one of those romantic Yemen nights that you read about in so many novels of yore. A sandstorm had kicked up from the north and all of a sudden I was lost, wandering through the desert haze. I couldn’t see a fucking thing.

“Chiachfeld! Alima! Haifa!”

A hand grabbed my arm and led me away. After a few yards of walking through the sand storm, I came through the flap of a warm and well-lit tent. My savior stood before me, wrapped in headscarves and a terry cloth robe from the hotel gift shop. The figure then disrobed to reveal a delicious female body with the type of curves that can turn priests into perverts. I saw her face as she removed her scarf—it was the girl roller-skating outside the Astrodome.

“I’ve seen you before.”

“You are in great danger, Todd Barrel.”

“Damn, baby. You fine!”

“My name is Iman Jabal Medina. I am the daughter of Rico Jabal Medina, leader of the Iranian Freedom Army and protector of the Sacred Shine of Ali.”

“I’m heir to the Cracker Barrel fortune.”

“I know.”

“ So, thanks for saving me. Have any scotch?”

“Todd, we haven’t much time. Your Uncle is planning something disastrous for my people. We believe he has plans to sell shipments of small arms to the government in order to quash our underground rebellion.”

“Hold on a sec, baby. Slow down. What do you say I put on some Keith Sweat and we relax on that goat skin. I wanna know what makes you tick.”

“Todd!”

She grabbed both my arms, shaking me and inadvertently rubbing up on my wood.

“You will be dead in 72 hours!”

“What?”

“We will both be dead.”

The flap of the tent opened and out of the whistling sand walked two mustachioed henchmen who looked like they had raided the Indiana Jones wardrobe trailer. They both drew their swords and went after Iman. Now, where I come from you don’t treat a hot piece of ass that way. I try to be open to other cultures but this was totally not cool.

Quickly, I tackled one of the beasts and rolled him up in the goatskin. I grabbed a handful of dolmas off a plate nearby and stuffed them into his mouth and up his nose. Iman moved with the grace of a deadly Arabic ballerina. Fighting off the second henchman with a medieval mace, she swung around and stuck a hairpin straight into his eye. He began flailing with blood shooting from his face. She delivered the coup de grâce and chopped his head off with his own sword. The head rolled over on top of the carpet-rolled assassin who started going Hendrix and vomiting in his own mouth. I grabbed her tightly, our hearts beating as one.

Again, the tent flap opened and I prepared myself for more bloodshed. Like a breath of spring air, A.Q. Chiachfeld sauntered in wearing British fatigues and carrying a gin-laced roadie.

“Todd, thank God you’re alright, man.”

I heard a click as I turned to see a Dirty Harry .44 pointed at Iman’s head. The person holding it was none other than the Saudi Prince Bando al Faisal.

“This woman was going to kill you, Mr. Barrel.”

“Actually, Prince. These men were trying to kill us and then we were going to make out.”

“They were trying to kill her, not you. They were my men.”

“Well, I killed the one with the dolmas so don’t blame that on her.”

“Todd, the Prince is a liar! He is using you—“

Iman was quickly muffled by one of the Prince’s men and dragged out of the tent.

“Prince, I know that things are done differently here, and when in Rome...but please don’t kill that girl. That Persian poon is too sweet to waste.”

“Very well, Todd. So it shall be.”

“So it is written!”

“So I am writing it. Now, let’s get down to business, gentlemen. Tomorrow you will fly into Kiev and then drive to Odessa. You will judge a beauty contest, the winners of which will have jobs at the new Hooters Riyadh. Or so they think. The girls that you choose will then fly back to Riyadh in a first class shipping container. Once I receive the girls, you will receive your payment. Do you understand?”

“Will the hot wings at the Hooters Riyadh be exactly like the hot wings in Houston?”

“Do not get smart with me, Barrel. To ensure that nothing goes wrong, I am sending Faruq with you. For help, of course.”

VII.

Things seemed to be getting worse. First, I’m cock-blocked by the Prince and then he sends his shifty assistant with us to Odessa. How hard is it to judge a Hooters beauty contest? Not very. That’s why this whole affair began giving me the creeps. Chiachfeld was also getting nervous. On the flight over, he broke out into a cold sweat after waking up from a nightmare. The stewardess cared for old A.Q. and gave him a nice, long BJ by the catering cart as he nursed a double scotch. That mofo is never off his game.

When we arrived in Odessa, everything seemed to go smoothly. Faruq was pretty chill and the food was good. Odessa is much like other Post-Communist cities—dark, dank and chock full of smoking hot bitches looking to get real with Westerners like us. I have to hand it to my uncle, the Hooters beauty contest is the perfect cover to find the tastiest honeys and smuggle them out.

The competition was held in the Kozakskyj Beer Garten and Go Cart! Fzun Parky just south of town. A large stage was set up where Chiachfeld and I judged the talent. The crowd was anxious as the pool of 200 hopefuls primped, pooped, tucked, trimmed and coiffed. After 180 ounces of beer and six strings of bratwurst, Chiachfeld and I were primed and ready for the Hooters challenge.

The competition was broken up into three categories: beer serving, wings balancing and lap dancing. (There’s no lap dancing at Hooters but the girls didn’t know this.) All the contestants were special in their own way and it was difficult to pick only a few. After we thinned the pool to 30 super hot women, Chiachfeld and I called intermission and informed the girls backstage that we would choose the winners the old fashioned way—through bribery. Sexual favors were accepted as well as Visa, Mastercard, Diners Club and Carte Blanche.

The winners were a fine group of Eastern bloc beauties—Svetlana, Melania, Vilita, Charlotta, Irinia, Nikita, Zoyechka, Urola, Ivana and Sacha. After the girls bid farewell to their fathers and informed their teachers that they would be absent for the remainder of the semester, we all boarded a Hummer stretch limousine and headed for the docks. The mood was joyous as we popped the top on some Chrissy and got down to Lil’ Kim.

The shipping container was nicer than I expected, complete with plush couches, bear skin throw rugs and a disco ball—all in Hooters orange. The girls willingly filed in and made themselves comfortable. I checked the paperwork and visas that were attached to the container. The names Barrel and Chiachfeld were peppered throughout the legalese and seemed in order. I then smelled what seemed

to be fresh paint by the door. I grabbed some steel wool from my pocket and began scrubbing. The words that were revealed stopped my heart—Buffett & Buffett International.

“Chiachfeld! Come take a look at this.”

“Todd, what’s the problem?”

“It’s the fucking Buffetts!”

As we turned, Faruq came barreling toward us, knocking Chiachfeld and myself into the container. The door closed shut and the container started moving. Where to? Lord only knew.

VIII.

I’m not sure how long we traveled in that container but it was incredible. Chiachfeld and I put the thought of looming death out of our heads and focused on the positives. It had been decided that the girls should not know about the minor change in plans for it would harsh their mellow. So, the mood remained happy and horny.

Chiachfeld, being the consummate gentleman, man of science and bon vivant that he is, had the foresight to score four eight-balls of Swiss cocaine before he left for our adventures. The shit came in handy. It’s no use crying over spilt milk, so we busted open that powder while sequestered in the shipping container. Tits, coffee tables, and the milky white asses of Ukrainian models—that’s where we sliced, diced and snorted our bounty. There ain’t nothing like a coke party and this was one for the books. My memory and your imagination can’t do justice to the shipping container’s debauched mood as we flossed our brains with Colombia’s finest and nourished ourselves on pubic hair and Hooters hot wings.

We had a rude awakening as the container finally stopped moving. The doors flew open and the sunlight scraped my eyes.

“Welcome to Saudi Arabia, gentlemen.”

“Oh, fuck.”

It was the Prince and a gaggle of machine-gun-wielding thugs. Faruq stood next to them with a shit-eating Arabian grin. They prodded us with the barrels of their guns until we had all exited the container. Then, something strange happened. The goons began to tear apart the container, ripping the plush lining from the walls and couches to reveal crates of grenades, rocket launchers, ammo and AK-47s. Chiachfeld and I looked at each other, astonished. If we had known about the combustibility of the container, I doubt that we would have been as cavalier with our freebase sessions.

“Mr. Barrel and Mr. Chiachfeld, you have served your purpose and now it’s time to die.”

“Wait a minute, Prince. Just answer me a few questions before it’s trigger time.”

“I suppose it can’t hurt.”

“What’s going on? You, my Uncle Jack, Jimmy Buffett, Warren Buffett? I know I’m the sacrificial lamb here, but clarify things for me.”

“Silly Todd, we’ve been doing this for years. Your Uncle Jack needed you out of the way so we all agreed to use you as the gopher this time. All our gophers have short lives.”

“And the Margaritaville Condos and Planned Community Resort Conference Center? That was just a ruse to get me in?”

“No, that part is real, Mr. Barrel. When your uncle finally takes control of Cracker Barrel, he and the Buffetts will reap untold riches. Now I must go. I have an arms deal with the Iranians and I mustn’t be late. Farewell, Mr. Barrel.”

“What about Iman? Did you kill her too?”

“No, I am offering her to the Iranian police as an added gift. They will decide her fate, which, I assume, will involve electrodes and a stadium basement. Enough! Take them away!”

They lined us up—Chiachfeld, the Hooters girls and myself—and blindfolded us. I could tell that we were at the airport from the planes buzzing above. Death by firing squad was not how I wanted to go. Even a Hutchence Exit was better than this final indignity. I could hear the goons load their magazines and prepare to shoot. Chiachfeld was muttering something about cheating on a university exam and the girls were crying uncontrollably.

Gunshots rang out. Then explosions. I was still alive. I pulled the blindfold from my eyes and saw twenty Persians on four wheelers engaged in battle with the Prince’s goons. It was the Iranian Freedom Army. We were saved. The Hooters girls quickly took up arms from the dead. Irinia dropped a cinder block on a wounded bloke’s chest, crushing him with a deadly Cleveland Steamer. Svetlana fired a rifle into the crotch of another man, blowing his genitals to smithereens. Sacha had a goon’s head locked between her legs and snapped his neck violently. Death by thighs.

Chiachfeld, meanwhile, was hotwiring a Black Hawk helicopter. Through the gunfire a tall figure approached, striding confidently as if bullets could not touch him.

“Todd Barrel, I am Rico Jabal Medina. Where is my daughter?”

“Rico, she’s at Prince Bando’s palace. She’s going to be given over to the Iranian police in the arms deal.”

“Son of a bitch!”

“There’s no time to lose, Rico. Get your best men and let’s hit these fuckers...Cracker Barrel style!”

The chopper lifted off as the IFA finished up with Prince Bando’s men. Our rag tag commando unit prepared as we flew above the streets of Riyadh. Rico’s Rebels sharpened their swords and sucked on Altoids. I lovingly loaded up my ivory Uzis and spoke to them.

“Boys, we’ve been through a lot together—Manila, Moscow, Las Vegas—the list goes on and on. It’s always personal, it’s always for a lady and we always play to win. Make this day no different. It’s time for Bando to get a stiff drink of retribution—straight from the Barrel.”

“Todd, I’ve got a visual on the Prince’s palace. Looks like the deal has gone down. There’s a phalanx of black Mercedes being trailed by military cargo vans.”

“Lock and load, boys. It’s time to roll.”

Chiachfeld dropped smoke bombs and landed the chopper on the lead car. Rico and his rebels hit the street fighting, slashing through bulletproof glass with their swords and biting the ears off their adversaries. These were not men you wanted to fuck with. Rico and I made our way through the chaos. He went Wesley Snipes on some poor suckers while I set my Uzis ablaze. An RPG was fired

straight at us but Rico jumped up off the fender of a 560 SL in time to cut the rocket in half. Across the combat zone I saw Iman, gagged and tied in the window of a cargo van.”

“Rico, she’s in the last van!”

Rico and I shot and cut our way through the field of Iranian freedom haters. I had a lot of blood on my hands, but at least it was foreign. We got to the van and Rico tossed a smoke bomb into cockpit. The driver got out, coughing and dry heaving. I put a throwing knife right between his eyes. Bingo, beach. We then liberated Iman from the van and untied her constraints. She hugged us both.

“I am so glad you’re alive, Todd.”

“Back at you, sugar tits.”

“Stay with me.”

“Not now. I have some unfinished business with a certain Saudi asshole.”

I ran through the palace and searched for Bando. The whole place was deserted. I heard a buzzing noise and followed it to a courtyard overlooking the city. It was there that I found Bando readying an ultralite glider for his escape. Printed on the wings were the words Buffett & Buffett International.

“Bando!”

“Barrel!”

“Your men are dead. It’s over.”

“Never!”

Bando took cover behind a lawn jockey as I emptied my last rounds. Those little fuckers are solid steel and protected him from my bullets. I ran across the courtyard and busted his jaw with a blistering roundhouse kick. Bando spit out a few bloody teeth and unsheathed a crescent shaped dagger. He came at me with a vengeance, arms moving like windmills, face filled with terror. Blood and sweat flew off him like a sprinkler and burnt my eyes, temporarily blinding me. I held up my hand to shield myself and his dagger entered. Jesus fuck it hurt. We went into a death roll towards his aircraft.

Our heads were dangerously close to the ultralite’s spinning propeller. Bando was strangling me when I spied a briefcase in the seat. I grabbed it and started smashing his head. The briefcase popped open and millions of Euro banknotes came flying out and into the propeller. The world’s most expensive confetti showered us and Bando screamed. Then he kneed me in the nuts so hard I lost my lunch. In the movies when a hero gets kicked in the nuts, he usually groans a bit and gets up. But this wasn’t Hollywood. It was Riyadh.

Bando hopped in the ultralite and flew away just as Rico and Iman arrived. Rico popped off a few shots from his AK but Bando was out of range.

“Sons of Babel! He’s getting away!”

“Rico, he kicked me in the nuts.”

“If we get back to the chopper we can still catch him.”

“No, Rico. I have a better idea.”

IX.

“Speed?”

“Thirty knots.”

“Depth?”

“150 feet.”

“ETA?”

“Five minutes off the coast of France.”

“Up periscope.”

“Yes, sir.”

Marc Rich gets a bad rap back in the States but in my book he’s tops. Chiachfeld called in a personal favor and Marc agreed to let us use his submarine with the proviso that we get it back to him before horse-racing season. The Boutros also came through with some Russian artillery by way of Uganda and the Iranian Freedom Army loaned us a hundred of their finest. Chiachfeld, Iman, the Hooters girls and I were leading the raid on Isle de Buffett and couldn’t wait to blow some shit up.

“Todd—“

“Yes Iman.”

“I am afraid. What if you don’t make it back? What if I don’t make it back?”

“By the will of Zeus, you will, my love.”

“Todd—“

“Yes Iman.”

“I am with child. Your child.”

“Then you shall fight tonight with my strength in you. ’Tis the strength of ten thousand men...and five former Miss Olympias. And a cat named Ricky.”

We geared up in Israeli military frogman suits, said a prayer to our respective deities and loaded the Zodiacs. Our plan was to enter stealthily, take out the guards, find the Buffetts and kill the Prince. Simple enough. Before pushing off I gazed at the darkened sky and looked for inspiration. A small plane flew overhead with a banner that read, “Todd’s a Pimp.” Fuck yeah, I am.

The protection on the island was pussy-ass French. Both Buffetts were too cheap to import American muscle so the guards were rent-a-frogs who were more concerned with lighting their Gauloises than watching the beach. They were easily subdued with our bolas, a silent but deadly ancient weapon. Alpha Team made its way to the security barracks and spied the Frenchie forces. They were sitting around in their underwear, watching art house movies and participating in behavior that is generally considered homosexual in most God-fearing nations. The only problem was that there were two thousand of them. Buffett didn’t skimp on volume—I’ll give him that.

The Hooters girls caused a diversion by strutting up to the men with a boom box playing “The Milkshake Song” and dancing seductively. They started lezzing-out, kissing each other and washing themselves with soapy sponges. All French eyes were focused on the poon. From the back, Beta Team moved in and sprayed down the barracks with Napalm. One distracted guard carelessly flicked his Gaulois to the floor and ignited a fiery blaze. It had begun.

Bullets were flying everywhere. The Hooters girls brought out their whips and went slave master on the boys. The IFA set fire to everything in sight. Lights went on in the penthouse suites and it was time for me to make my move. I hurried up the castle stairs.

I caught Prince Bando in a corridor of the castle trying to escape.

“We meet again, Bando.”

“Todd!”

“You picked the wrong Barrel to fuck with, swine!”

“Todd, please. Wait. In this suitcase I have ten million dollars in rubies. We’ll split it. Fifty-fifty.”

“Not a chance.”

“Seventy-thirty?”

“Time for you to meet seventy-two virgins, Bando.”

My ivory Uzis unleashed the full charm of their load straight into Bando. It was quick and painless death for a man who deserved to suffer like a dog. Guess I’m just nice like that.

Iman joined me as we made our way up the spiral staircase to Jimmy and Warren’s lair. She spit on Bando’s corpse as she passed by. The woman oozed sex and danger in that skin-tight wetsuit, carrying a harpoon.

There was a large steel door at the top of the staircase that was preventing us from kicking some serious Buffett ass. A grappling hook flew through the side window and took hold. I looked down to find Chiachfeld hoisting himself up with a motorized belt.

“Cheerio, team.”

“Chiachfeld!”

“Here’s some explosive I cooked up in the lab. It has the power of C4 but none of the calories.”

“A.Q., let’s blow this door to hell.”

When the smoke cleared, Iman, Chiachfeld and I came rushing in. Warren Buffett’s personal security detail consisted of five fat mobsters with Tommy guns. Damn, that Warren’s old school. They were no match for us as Iman shot clear through one of the doughboys with her harpoon. Without losing a step, she drew the cable taut and clotheslined two others. Chiachfeld grabbed hold of the chandelier and swung down feet first. His sharpened steel climbing cleats dealt a deadly blow to Fat Man Soprano’s carotid artery. It left a bloody mess.

We continued up some stairs to a library high up in the castle’s turret. Exotic animal heads were mounted on the walls along with African spears and a taxidermied mastodon sitting prone in the corner. There weren’t any signs of our enemies. It seemed that they had escaped. Feeling depressed, I fixed a snifter of brandy and plopped down in a zebra armchair.

“This fucking sucks.”

“Don’t speak so soon, mate.”

“What is it, Chiachfeld?”

“I smell something...funny.”

Chiachfeld’s olfactory powers were the stuff of legend. Rumor has it he’s banned from truffling in Perigord and persona non grata at the Oaxaca fish market. Iman and I fell silent as he tiptoed around, sniffing the air and catching signs of breaking wind. Chiachfeld approached the giant mastodon.

“I’m getting hints of lime, Todd. The bouquet carries a gamey aftertaste of seaplane and imported sand. Wait. Wait. There’s another scent. It’s...it’s...a hundred dollar bill.”

“Chiachfeld! Look out!”

Warren Buffett jumped out from the mastodon like a crazed jack in the box and swung down at Chiachfeld with his scimitar, cutting off Chiachfeld’s hand and rendering his arm a bloody stump. Jimmy Buffett then followed with a pump action shotgun. Iman rolled for cover, I grabbed a spear and Chiachfeld searched for his missing extremity. They had Trojan-horsed us and gained the upper hand.

As I looked out from behind the elephant footstool, I saw Jimmy pulling Iman by the hair and pointing his shotgun at her beautiful Persian face.

“Come out, come out wherever you are.”

“Is that another one of your shitty songs, Buffett?”

“Barrel, you can give yourself up and I’ll kill her softly. Or, you can watch her brains splatter into the fire.”

This kind of talk from the man who penned “Last Mango in Paris.”

“You’ve got five seconds, Barrel...four, three, two, one—”

I stood up and chucked my spear with Olympic precision directly into the barrel of Buffett’s shotgun as he pulled the trigger. The gun exploded in his hand, sending shrapnel tearing through his side and ripping off his guitar-playing arm.

“Jesus Christ, Barrel. You’ve ruined my career! I was only fucking kidding.”

Warren Buffett must have slipped out in the confusion because there was no sign of the little number cruncher anywhere. I spied a trail of pennies leading upward to yet another staircase. Fucking tits! All this climbing and fighting was making me agitated but I soldiered on and followed the little trail of pennies.

The rooftop view was amazing, except for the hot air balloon that Buffett was gassing up for his escape. It was shaped like a huge dollar sign with Berkshire Hathaway written across the side. All of a sudden little Warren Buffett came running at me like a crazed Chucky and tried to hack my head off. I deftly bent like a reed in the wind to avoid his deadly advances.

“You’re a dainty, little girl, Buffett.”

“Todd Barrel, your resolve is honorable. It’s a shame I have to kill you. Hee, hee, hee.”

“I don’t know whether to fight you or fuck you. Ask your mommy if you can come out and play.”

Buffett came at me once again. The pitter-patter of Warren’s feet announced the billionaire’s death charge. I crouched and sprung up, back flipping over him as he took another swing of the scimitar.

I landed and went to town. My kidney punches landed with awesome force and sent the man down to the ground. I kicked and kicked and kicked. When all the vigor had exited from Buffett’s body, I walked over and put my boot to his glasses, grinding them into the stone. With sword in hand, I stood over his bloodied body.

“You lost, Buffett.”

“I’m too rich to kill, Barrel. Don’t you see, the world needs billionaires like me.”

“So does Hell.”

“Monsieur Bar-rel! Put zee zimitar down!”

The fucking French police had arrived on the scene and now they were pointing the gun at me!

“We will take zis from here. He must be twied in zee courts of zee laws.”

“Pierre, I’ve got fifteen inches of justice in my hand right here.”

“And twelve in your pants. We will not be doing sings zee Barrel way tonight. Drop it, or I wheel be shooting you!”

Iman ran to me, clutching me close. My erection reminded me that there are more important things in life than murdering billionaires.

“Let’s get out of here, Todd. Someplace quiet.”

“I know a garage apartment outside Geneva where we can go make little Iranian freedom fighters all day long.”

“I love you forever, Todd.”

“Forever-ever?”

X.

Warren Buffett did not go to jail. Money talks and businessmen walk—straight back home to Omaha. Jimmy worked himself a similar deal. As it turns out, the French love Jimmy Buffett even more than Jerry Lewis. He agreed to host a benefit concert for the American Friends of Versailles and walked away scot free, except for his arm getting blown off. Iman and I had sex for ten days in Chiachfeld’s apartment while he was in Tahiti. On the eleventh day I gave her an ultimatum—go back to Iran to fight the religious police or get a job. She left two hours later. Day jobs are for chumps. The Barrel fortune remained intact. My father came out of his coma, chided my uncle for taking over the company and trying to have me killed, and retook the helm of Cracker Barrel Enterprises. I am still the sole heir to the fortune, but an heir without an income. Tits!

Oh, I almost forgot. The girls are safe and sound, working at the Hooters in Houston.