

American Dream

by David W Brown on January 10, 2023. © All rights reserved

Jimbo likened the women living in the retirement complex to the cacti surrounding it.

“They look strong and prickly and impenetrable on the outside but there’s a soft and sustaining inner core in both”.

His battered RV had run out of gas in the Walmart parking lot across the street from The Villages a couple of weeks before in a triple-tiered miracle of convergence and convenience.

Walmart had a gas station that accepted his one remaining credit card; they allowed RV's to park for free in the lot overnight; and he encountered some of the cacti returning to their condos with bags of groceries and vague memories.

"Hey, didn't you play at Arizona state university on the same bill as Tom Petty?", one asked as they passed Jimbo, sitting in the stepwell of the RV, smoking and nursing one of his last beers.

The women were his age- "sixty plus" is all Jimbo will admit to- and despite their evident affluence, there was a similar thirst apparent on their tanned faces.

"Loneliness and desperation", Jimbo's old bass player used to say, "are the devil's playground for coyotes like us".

In his younger and even middle years, Jimbo had his pick of the crop when it came to women of the lonely and desperate persuasion. Now, broke and stuck in Green Valley Arizona- “twenty miles from Tucson and a million miles from anywhere”- as he used to say about such places, Jimbo’s predatory instincts took over.

“Hell yeah! You’re not just a pretty face, you have a great memory too”, he cawed back at the cacti.

“But you must have been in diapers then, honey. Did your momma tell you about ol’ Jimbo?”.

The women laughed as lonely women do; their desperation as detectable to Jimbo as the scent of the creams they wore in abundance to ward off the effects of the hot sun on their ageing

bodies.

"I told you it was him!", one crowed loudly to her companion, "your band was really something, I'm surprised you guys didn't make it bigger...".

"Tell me about your friend", Jimbo cut off the uncomfortable assessment.

"Are you a music lover too, honey?"

Her smile told him all he needed to know; she was a rose stuck in the shadow of her louder, more confident cacti companion, just ripe and waiting for someone like him to shine a bright light on her and make her flourish.

"I do love Tom Petty", she replied, a blush forming under her bronzed cheeks.

"Did", her friend interjected, "did love him, Tom died, you know".

"Well, ol' Jimbo's still alive and kicking", he stood, extending his hand to the rose. "And what's your name, pretty lady?"

"Constance", she responded, the blush reaching full bloom.

"Constance, Constance, constant beauty, rose amidst the desert's thorns", Jimbo said, gripping her hand a little too firmly.

"I should write you a song", he laughed.

Constance was a widow, like most of the cacti and flowers in the Villages. Her man had been an insurance broker; the polar opposite of a coyote, leaving her comfortable and secure with a condo, a 401K, and a brand-new Tesla that he bought just before his heart pumped its last careful beat.

She realized over time that she missed something, but it wasn't him.

In fact, it was the same thing she'd been missing even when he was there, managing the decisions, and risk and money and whatever else there was to manage.

The Villages was neither her idea nor her choice; he was a golfer and dreamed of driving his cart back and forth from their driveway to the clubhouse every day, with five hours of golf and beers with his buddies in between. "The American Dream", he called it.

His buddies were all married and any single men in the Villages were carbon copies of him, so it was just as easy for Constance to shop and clean and cook for one with him gone. Easier, perhaps.

But she felt something beyond the usual sense of a man's strength from Jimbo's hand as they locked eyes in the heat of the parking lot. Constance remembered getting the same feeling from her father's hand as she held it while he lay dying in a care home in Duluth Minnesota.

Her father was a strong man, even in his eighties, even after a series of strokes, but Constance remembered feeling more like he was clinging to her, like a man clutching a rope at sea.

She looked at Jimbo with a smile that mirrored his confidence and gripped his hand with a strength of her own, a strength she had long forgotten or simply misplaced.

"I'd like that, Jimbo", she said in a voice that sounded to him like the Sirens had to Odysseus.

"I'd like that very much".

Author notes

The Villages is a chain of 55+ retirement communities in Arizona and Florida.