

Traffic Girl Wars

Prologue

See the pretty Traffic Girls!

What a world of merriment when their dresses unfurl!

See them twinkle, not a wrinkle

In the glassy steal of night

While the stars that used to be there

Hide their crystalline delight

U

- Found scrawled in a men's room stall in Babs and Roberts', two months after Channel 2 News hired Eustacia Sharp. The stylized capital U identifies the author as a member of the Eustacia cult.

The sky is on fire with red and orange clouds

that stretch from the Delaware in front of me

to the Schuylkill right behind.

On the TV screen in my kitchen,

I see the Traffic Girls dance,

to Alicia Keys,

in front of green screens,

*to John Legend,
in tight dresses,
legs and asses that don't quite fill them.
The base rattles my plasma screen to the beat,
as my coffee percolates.
They take me to the highway as I lie strewn across
the road of my desperation,
the road to my last chance,
beneath the twisted wreckage of my life.
I should've died last night.
I should be in pieces across Route 1.
Maybe I am,
and Hugh Butters, too,
still smiling that ridiculous smile.
He hands me the bourbon
as we stare at the asphalt horizon.
Two wavy lines, less detailed than stick figures,
inch toward us along the road,
expanding, gathering mass from the haze.
They approach and show themselves,
the Traffic Girls,
alien-thin and all eyes,
not as rescuers,*

but as indifferent witnesses to the spectacle we've created.

The taller one stands over my head.

It is Eustacia.

The ruffled edges of her dress billow up around

the straight, smooth lines of her legs.

My eye follows the lines

until I am pulled into

the vanishing point between them.

- Anonymously published in the Philadelphia City Paper five months after
Channel 2 News hired Eustacia Sharp.

By the time they were gathered in one place, minutes before the great earthquake ripped Philadelphia in two right down Broad Street, before the Orange Line commuters became the first to see Old City circa ten thousand B.C., they had gathered into gangs on either side of Broad Street leading to City Hall, where William Penn's bronze likeness faced northeast in mute reproach.

The collection of groups who came to fight for or against women's rights, whether they knew it or not, was an enviable portrait of diversity, the kind Fortune 100 companies hire overpriced consultants to achieve. Each came of their own volition and for their own reasons. In the center of Broad, the Mummers divisions gathered. The Fancy Brigades were there to

prove that not only LGBTQ+ supporters could dress like women and look fabulous; the String Bands loved playing banjos to any crowd of more than three, and the Comics still had not realized that the term “the one percent” also described people who weren’t scared shitless by clowns.

Runners were there in running gear made of polyester, nylon, and Lycra, shirts with Raglan sleeves, breathable socks, and carbon rubber shoes. Some wondered why they were there, the theory being that they saw a large crowd and mistakenly thought it was the Broad Street Run.

The street toughs were there: the dirt bike gangs and ATV riders who wanted to show off their new tricks and cranial lacerations; Neo-Nazis like the Keystone Zipperheads, who were tired of being judged by their choice to shave their heads and wear Nazi regalia; and the South Philly palookas who had wrenched the Rocky statue from its base and dragged it from the Art Museum down the Ben Franklin Parkway to get it away from “all those artsy fruitcakes.”

The Pussy Protestors were there, of course—they had been there from the beginning—the term meant to represent all feminists within the City of Brotherly Love. They varied in agenda and militancy, from those who wanted to simply end catcalling to those who wanted to castrate all men with their bare hands. G.A.S.H., or Gals Against Sexual Humiliation, was of the latter type, and they took the Union League balcony from where they challenged all the “cigar-deep-throating, bourbon-sucking pussies” within the structure to come out and fight like girls. On the sidewalk in front of the Union League, a white-haired septuagenarian with a megaphone admonished the women, saying they were setting feminism back fifty years at least.

Added to this were the satiated foodies, the standardized patients, the inspiration-seeking playwrights, Once Upon a Nation thespians, hackathon dweebs, rubberneckers, and enough disgruntled Philadelphia Eagles fans to curdle your Nestle Quik.

The reporters from the local news stations were also there, but without the traffic girls themselves. The girls were nowhere to be seen as the masses called for them and divided themselves into their respective cults, chanting polemics, expressing songs of unrelenting love, and waving banners that expressed gauche yearnings for their goddesses of fertility, beauty, war, and casual fucking. The banners held their symbols, all stylized Roman letters: “O” for Oya from Channel 5, “A” for Araceli from Channel 34, and “U” for Eustacia, the goddess from Channel 2 News. Amid the discordant roar, she appeared, Man’s original sin and siren.

Eustacia appeared atop William Penn’s hat, standing calmly above Broad Street and fresh from the kill, having dispatched the two other traffic girls. She wore a flowing gown of crimson-speckled white that unraveled by a thread the wind pulled toward New Jersey. Her violet hair came loose from two braids that hung down the sides of her face and onto her breasts. The humid gale whipped it into a frenzy of celestial annihilation—the collision of galaxies, the violence that caused creation—and haloed the face that had haunted the men of Philadelphia for six months and twenty-two days.

No one knew Eustacia’s origin. Some said she was trans-oceanic, the dreamers said she was from Atlantis, and the idiots said she was born from Jersey sea foam. The educated along the Avenue of the Arts believed she descended from Danish coastline raiders described by Shakespeare, but abandoned the romantic notion due to a lack of evidence. Some say she never smiled, but that the promise of one could cause any man to throw away his life as he would on gambling or booze. The only certainty was her purpose: she was sent to punish men. She made them discard their reason, debased them, and reduced them to animal cravings, the least of which was lust. The most pious of them turned pagan; the most faithful were stripped of their convictions, leaving their wives no recourse but to send huffy emails to the general manager of

the news stations.

At the earthquake's first tremor, all looked toward the top of City Hall. Those who had binoculars saw her naked for that one time, and it convulsed them with the longing for the unreachable. She held up the severed heads of her foes and threw them down onto the mob, leaving the followers of each dead traffic girl to fight each other for possession of the trophy.

So distracted was the mob by the goddess that they did not react when the Broad Street asphalt buckled and split as it opened with a hiss of superheated steam. The Fancy Brigades were the first to fall into the widening fissure and were cooked to the bone while still looking fabulous. The String Bands treated the abyss to *Oh Dem Golden Slippers* with banjo strings echoing crisp and sharp through the ebbing light of the bottomless chasm. The Broad Street runners soon followed, heads and eyes glued to their Fitbits until they were properly ravaged by the knobby tires of the dirt bike gangs who rode joyfully to their doom.

The Zipperheads attacked the dirt bike riders for being black. The Pussy Protestors went on a castration mission. All fell into the primordial canyon, including random Gen Zers who might have survived had they been able to peel their eyes from their TikTok pages.

City Hall sank into the earth, its 88 million pounds of limestone, marble, and granite overwhelming the saturated clay and fill beneath it as the ground liquefied into a slurry. But Eustacia did not follow. What happened next pushes the limits of credulity and is documented because every survivor swore it was true. By the time Billy Penn's hat had vanished from sight, Eustacia, in all her naked glory, rose up and up into the sky and streaked across it, trailing stardust.

By the end of it, Philadelphia lay smoldering, a city as defeated and dead as Troy. Most who witnessed the disaster were dead. The only ones left to describe events were the Comics,

who looked as melancholy and misunderstood as before.

Accounts varied widely in detail, but that's what happens in fearful times. Everyone saw it differently; each saw only what they wanted to see. Nothing was learned, and no one could care, and everyone wrote their version of the strange and terrible saga of the Traffic Girl Wars.