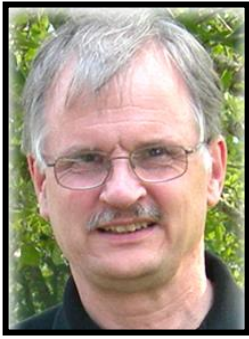




The Portal

A Collection of Short Stories and Poems
by members of the Writer's Group



Black Friday

By Rick Weber

It was very early on a cold and damp Friday, Black Friday -the day after Thanksgiving and Art North was trying to jump start his old Honda Civic with his wife, Marie's, almost as old Dodge Mini-van. He connected the cables to the Honda's battery and jumped into car praying that it would start. Luck was on his side and the Civic kicked over on the first try. Art was thankful for that because he had to be at work by 4:30 AM. Art was a salesman at a nearby big box store. He got the cables off both vehicles and closed up Marie's van after putting the jumper cables in the trunk of his Honda. With that done, he headed to the store.

This was Art's fourth Black Friday at the store where he worked in the electronics

department. He did not always work in retail sales. Art had been a human resources (HR) manager at a local factory and lost his job more than three years earlier when the company closed the plant as a downsizing measure at the start of the recession. Art landed his new job first as a temporary worker for the holiday season but he became a regular full time employee when he had the best sales record of anyone in his department that Christmas. Art felt lucky just to have a job. The area where he lived with his family in the Northeast had been particularly hard hit by the economic downturn. No other HR positions had become available locally and relocation was not feasible. Marie worked as an elementary school teacher and had been with the local school board for over twenty years. Both Art and Marie had strong ties to their community having grown up there even attending a local college where they met. They married shortly after graduation.

Art focused on the slippery wet roadway in front of him as he drove to the store. As Art pulled into the mall parking lot, he saw that a long line of customers had staged themselves at the store's main outside entrance. Art parked near the employees' entrance and went inside to clock in. He put his overcoat and lunch in his locker and headed out to the sales floor after checking his appearance in a mirror on his way out. His thinning gray hair was combed neatly and his store name tag was pinned evenly on his sport jacket lapel. He was ready for the opening volley of the Christmas rush. He knew that the next four weeks were crunch time not just for the store but also for him. Marie and Art were depending on his commissions from the Holiday season to help them break even with their finances for the year.

In his assigned department, Art could see his boss, Walt De Witt, waiting for him. His coworkers had yet to arrive there. Walt was anxious himself. Just like Art, he

needed a good bonus check to survive. Walt greeted Art cordially by asking him, "Are you ready?" "Of course," Art quickly replied and then Walt went over the Black Friday promotions with him. Walt was glad to have Art working for him because Art was both dependable and a good salesman. In fact, Art was still the best salesman in their department. Two of Art's four co-workers are not so enthusiastic about their jobs. Why Walt put them on the schedule to open on Black Friday Art did not know. Five minutes before the doors opened, the two stragglers, Joe and Tony, showed up on the floor. With no time for Walt to chastise them, the doors opened and an onslaught of humanity was headed their way. Three customers came right to Art, who was at the cashier's counter. All three had been in a week earlier and Art gave them information on some promotional items which would be on sale. Each of them had grabbed several different items from the displays. They knew what they wanted and Art was glad that they remembered him.

It was shaping up to be a good day for him. Sales were brisk for everyone on the floor, even for Joe and Tony. Art elected to work an extended shift on Black Friday when Walt asked him since he could use the money and he knew that Walt could not rely on Joe and Tony to close the sales as fast as him.

Art was glad to be busy. It kept his mind off of things at home. His relationship with Marie was solid. His younger son, Sean, was the light of their lives; an honor student in his freshman year of high school looking forward to becoming an engineer after college. The problem was with their older son, David. He was a junior with another year and a half until graduation. While Sean was a giving child, David was always demanding. When times were good, David always got what he wanted; a new computer and a cell phone, just to name a few. Even though he was sixteen years old and could hold down an after school job, David chose not to work. On the other hand Sean, at fourteen, hustled to make his

own spending money; cutting lawns in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter. Sean even put some money aside for college. Sean knew that his parents were strapped but David kept begging them for everything even though he fully was aware of their situation. David stayed out late many nights past his curfew. Art and Marie had spoken to him and even disciplined him on more than one occasion without success. Sometimes when he came home late, Art and Marie had waited up for him and found David to be inebriated or high on something when he walked in the door. They confronted him each time and each time he denied using any alcohol or drugs. Lately, Art and Marie noticed some things missing from their home such as an antique ring, an heirloom from Marie's grandmother. Like many parents, their suspicions about David's substance abuse problems were becoming confirmed and now they were discussing what to do about it.

Marie got out of bed about an hour after Art had left. It was her usual time to get up anyway. She generally used it to make lunches, grade papers, and get ready for work. Since schools were closed for the long Thanksgiving weekend, she would be doing other things on a personal level. Marie, Art, Sean, and even David spent Thanksgiving at the home of Marie's parents. Art had no close family members in the area. His parents were deceased for some time and his siblings were scattered across the country. David stayed for dinner but left right after when a friend called him. This led to another late night for her and Art with Art needing to get up early to be at the store. David got home about 1:00 AM but was too intoxicated to have a coherent conversation with by them. He staggered up to his room and fell asleep on top of the bedcovers where he still sleeping was when Marie got up later that morning and checked on him. Sean was also sleeping but had plans to start work later in the morning at a Christmas tree stand to make money for

Christmas presents. Sean had stayed up with his parents for a time while they waited for David. Art and Marie told Sean to go to bed before it got to be too late knowing of his plans to work.

Marie sat at the kitchen table with her laptop in front of her. She was searching the internet for counseling services to help them with David. With the missing jewelry from the house, she and Art knew that rehabilitation may be David's next stop but they needed to go through some other steps first. The school district furnished her with some leads and now it was up to her and Art to find a solution even if David was resistant. Visiting the various websites made Marie cry. She asked herself, as she had done a number of times before, how could two boys raised by the same parents under the same roof be so different; Sean so kind and giving with David so selfish and demanding.

After an hour, Marie could not bear the process any longer and turned off her computer. She got dressed

and came back to the kitchen to make breakfast. With the coffee pot brewing, she heard Sean behind her saying, "Good morning, Mom." She turned to him and smiled saying, "Good morning, sleepy head. What can I get you for breakfast?" Sean was beginning to show signs of growing up and with his changing voice he told Marie, "A couple of fried eggs and toast would be great." Marie fried a couple of eggs for herself along with the two she was making for Sean while he made toast for both of them. They ate together as Sean discussed his plans for today. He asked Marie, "Can you drop me off at the tree stand by nine? I don't want to be late. Mr. Smith wants me to help him set up a display." "No problem," she replied as she was cleaning the skillet. She got Sean to the stand run by their neighbor, Bob Smith -a nursery owner, promptly at nine. As she kissed Sean on the cheek, she wished him luck on his new venture before returning home to find that David was still in bed.

With the house somewhat to herself, she called a counseling service, which happened to be open, and made an appointment for early the following week for her and Art to meet to talk about David. Her initial conversation not only confirmed that David had a substance abuse problem but that from what Marie outlined about David's recent behavior, the problem was getting worse. After she hung up with the service, Marie just sat at the kitchen table and sobbed. The thing which ran over and over again in her mind was at sixteen David was throwing his life away with her and Art almost helplessly being forced to watch. After she got her emotions in check, Marie cleaned up the kitchen and put away some serving pieces she had taken to her parents' house for Thanksgiving.

It was after 11:00 AM when David finally woke up. He came down to the kitchen to find Marie going over the monthly bills at the table. "Good morning," he said with a groggy slur to his voice.

Marie turned to him and snapped, "Where were you last night? We were worried about you." "I was just out with the guys hanging out," came his vague reply. Marie just shook her head knowing that this would be the best answer she would get from him. She also knew that her and Art would need to confront David together after they saw the counselor. "What are you doing today?" Marie asked him. "I am going out to the mall with a few people to do some window shopping," was his once again vague response. "Well, I am going over to your grandparents to help out with Grandma for a bit while Grandpa does some errands," Marie said. Marie's mother had Alzheimer's disease and Marie went over as much as she could to give her father a respite. With that, Marie put on her coat and told David, "There's leftover turkey in the refrigerator if you want something to eat." David could only mutter okay as she walked out the door to her van. As she got into the van, Marie only hoped that nothing else would be

missing from the house when she returned.

Although he was having a long day, Art was making a lot of sales. It was now noon and he called Marie on his lunch break to see how things were going. She was still on her way to her parents' place and gave Art the rundown about appointment with the family counselor along with her conversation with David after he got out of bed. Art and Marie commiserated and made some plans for confronting David about his issues after their meeting with the counselor. "I never thought that we would have to go through something like this," Art told her in a shaking voice. "I know," Marie responded quietly as she pulled in front the house. "I used to wonder how parents could let their kids get hooked on drugs before this happened to us," Marie felt the tears well up again in her eyes. "We'll see what the counselor says next week and then we may have to drop the hammer on David," Art resolutely said to her. Before Art could go on, Marie

cut him short after seeing her father waving to her from the front door. "Art, I have to go. Daddy is waiting for me." "I know," Art replied. "I have to get back to work myself. I should be home about six. We'll talk some more then." On a lighter note to change the mood, Marie told Art, "I hope you know that we're having leftovers for dinner." "I wouldn't expect anything else," Art said with a laugh, "I love you." "And I love you, too," Marie responded as she hung up.

At about 5:30 PM, Marie's father got home from his rounds and Marie told him about spending the afternoon going through family photographs with her mother. They both sadly noted that Marie's mother was succumbing more and more to her disease. Marie hugged her father and left. She got home to find David gone, which she expected. As she began to get things out of the refrigerator for dinner she heard a knock at the door. At the same time, Art finished up at the store for the day and was headed home. As he pulled into their

block, he saw a police car parked in their driveway. His first thought was what David has done now. He hurried inside and saw Marie seated on the living room sofa crying profusely. Two officers were with her. One, a female, was sitting beside her with her male partner standing nearby. "What happened?" Art asked in a stressed tone. "There's been an accident," the male officer started to say. Before the officer could finish, Art butted in, "What happened to David?" Then he heard Marie cry out, "It's not David! It's Sean! He's dead!" With that Art's knees buckled and the male officer guided him to a nearby winged back chair. "Mr. North," the male officer continued in a calm quiet tone, "Sean was struck at the Christmas Tree stand by an elderly woman who had a stroke while driving her car down Main Street. He was hit along with a man who was there to buy a tree. They both died on impact. We are sorry for your loss." The officers stayed for a while giving Art and Marie the information they would need for the undertaker to claim

Sean's body. Both Art and Marie then went over to Marie's parents to break the news to them. David was nowhere to be found and his cell phone was turned off. They left him no message. Marie's father was devastated crying uncontrollably while her mother looked at them in a state of confusion. The rest of the weekend was spent making arrangements for Sean's funeral and David did not make it home until Sunday night when Art and Marie gave him the news. David cried but they did not believe his tears.

Sean was buried the following Tuesday in a plot near Art's parents' graves. The funeral service and burial were crowded with relatives, friends, and Sean's classmates. All deeply mourned Sean's passing. David stayed close to home for Sean's wake and burial but stepped out for some unexplained short periods of time returning home each time under the influence of something. After the funeral, David again disappeared but Art and Marie had too much

going on to chase after him. At their home, Art and Marie graciously received the other mourners. Their neighbors, many had known Sean his whole life, brought over large servings of food for those who were there. This was viewed as quite generous by Art and Marie since some of them were also having tough economic times. Walt De Witt came to extend his condolences and told Art when he was away from the other visitors to take as much time off from work as he needed. Art thanked Walt and told him that he would be back to work the following day but would need to take some time off later in the week to attend to some other matters. Walt's reply to Art was, "Just let me know and we will work with you at the store."

Two days after Sean's burial, Art and Marie got in to see the family counselor, Dr. Charles St. Clair a psychologist specializing in substance abuse. Dr. St. Clair got right to the point. "David needs in-patient treatment. His unexplained absences and under the

influence behavior when he comes home both indicate that something serious is going on with him. We won't be able to know the extent of his problems until we have the opportunity to talk with him. I know that this is hard on both of you especially with the loss of his brother, Sean. David is sixteen and you as his parents can have him hospitalized without his consent. We can help you with this by having an intervention. This will be difficult for you and, we will work with you at each step. You are not alone." With that both Art and Marie sobbed together dreading the thought of losing two sons. Dr. St. Clair gave them information for the center and a contact number for them to call when David finally showed up at home.

The following day as he was sleeping off another stint of partying, three large men came into David's room, woke him up, and spirited him out of the house to a waiting van passed his parents who were crying in the living room. "Where are you taking me?" screamed

David at the top of his lungs. "To some place safe," said one of the men. Initial assessments at the rehabilitation center revealed that David had a serious drug problem and that he would be an in-patient for an unspecified time. Art and Marie faced this with silent resignation and hoped for the best. The good thing was that David was still a minor and could not sign himself out of the treatment program. He had to face his problems.

During the rest of the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Art and Marie grieved for the loss of Sean and prayed for David. Art worked long hours at the store while Marie spent time with her parents when she was not in school teaching. It was a long painful interlude for them. A week after the funeral, Marie went into Sean's room for the first time and the shoe box where Sean kept his extra money and valuables was empty. Marie sat down on Sean's bed and cried. David had robbed his dead brother. Art also broke down himself later when he

got home from work and Marie told him. Still, they had to continue in the Holiday spirit. With Marie in charge of the school's Christmas pageant and Art putting on his best face at the store for the customers, they both felt that this was the most difficult Christmas they ever would have. Grieving for Sean and waiting for more information about David made thoughts of celebrating the Season the last things on their minds.

Dr. St. Clair told Art and Marie at a family counseling session that David was proving to be a hard case most notably in group therapy; denying he had a problem and blaming Art and Marie for his situation. Although he could not go into specifics with them because of doctor-patient confidentiality, Dr. St. Clair told them not to give up on David yet. Their health insurance from the school board allowed for a certain amount of in-patient care so for the time being they would not be hit with huge bills from the hospital. At this point according to treatment

protocol, they could not have contact with David. For the time being, Marie and Art were not anxious themselves to see David.

As the Christmas Day drew closer, Marie and Art, when he could, spent their free time with Marie's parents. Her mother's memory was fading but she still asked, "Where are David and Sean?" Marie and Art went all out and decorated her parents' house not just for her mother and father but, for themselves, as well. Lights, a train garden, and a large tree with the many ornaments her parents had collected over the years graced the living room. A festive wreath was on the front door and lighted candles were in every window of the house. Even with her declining condition, Marie's mother helped address Christmas cards and strange as it may seem, Marie's father and Marie got some sense of purpose by explaining to her who some of the people were whom she had forgotten as she addressed the envelopes. Art was glad that Walt De

Witt listened to him outside of work while he vented his frustrations with David and his loss of Sean. As it turned out, Walt was that one true friend to Art, a friend most people never have and Walt continued to help Art through this most difficult time.

On Christmas morning, Art had his first day off since Sean's funeral and he went with Marie early to her parents' place. Their own home was dark and unadorned. They had no one there with whom to share the holiday. The place evoked pain. They would never get over the loss of Sean. As for David, they still had not had any direct contact with him but Dr. St. Clair had told them that David was making some progress. This was a sign of hope but Marie and Art knew that for David there was a long way to go.

They entered Marie's parents' house to find her mother having a good day and her father upbeat. They exchanged gifts, ate a hearty breakfast, and made calls to family members living outside of the area. It was the first time that both Marie

and Art had smiled and laughed in almost a month.

Indeed, this Christmas was the most difficult one Art and Marie would ever have. The best thing to come of it was a stronger bond between them and greater love for each other as they looked to the New Year. This was the best gift they could have given each other.



She Loves
By Joanne Williams

She is in Love
She love with her soul
Heart and existence

She's soft and gentle
But firm where she stands
Her passion is so relentless

There's gold in her eyes
Her locks are spiral in perfect form
Just as Unique as her glistening smile

She shares this love with those she meet
And it flows so vast
Beyond miles and miles

She's willing to share this gift of the gem in her heart

A symbol of love
A talent to proclaim
She's glimmering as a beautiful work of art.



Yellow Flower
By Joanne Williams

Melissa and Glen were moving their last piece of furniture in to the house. "Hold it steady Glen. I don't want the vase to fall and shatter. It's very special to me; it was my Aunts favorite." Melissa said to Glen as he nearly trips over the steps with the vase in his arms.

"Don't worry. If I trip, I'll catch the vase while I fall and knock my head on the floor." Glen said as he caught his balance.

Melissa and Glen had been married for about a year when Melissa's Aunt Dally passed away. She left the house to Melissa as an inheritance. It's a single story small brick house with a walkway leading to a screened in porch in the front. The lawn is spacious

and trimmed, surrounded by a red picket fence. On the left side in front of the house is a flower garden. It has white roses, lavender, and yellow daffodils.

Glen placed the vase on the wooden table. They went outside and sat on the white vintage rocking chairs on the porch. Mellissa was admiring the garden.

"Aunt Dally loved her garden. She talked about it all the time. When I would come to visit, she would tell me to never pull the flowers out of the garden." Melissa said.

Glen looked at her and asked, "Why couldn't you pull the flowers?"

Melissa said, "She would say 'it's not the time'."

Glen looked puzzled and asked, "Not time for what?"

"I don't know, but I will keep the garden up to par as much as I can. I just won't pull the flowers." Melissa said.

"Yeah, you don't want to dig up something gross like a body or something." Glen chuckled as they head back

inside to unpack their furniture.

"It's sad that Aunt Dally isn't here anymore", Melissa said as she carefully moved the vase to center of the wooden dinette table.

"Yeah, too bad she didn't leave us any money", Glen said.

Melissa turned toward Glen and said, "How can you be so insensitive?"

"I'm sorry honey, but face it, I lost my job; we don't have any money. How are we going to get through these tough times?" Glen said.

"Let's hope to find a way Glen," Melissa says as they embraced.

That night while Glen was sound asleep, Melissa climbed out of bed and walked over to the window of the bedroom. She looked at the garden and started to think about her Aunt.

In a whisper she said, "I hope we could find a way to get through these tough times. Please show us a way."

Melissa got back into bed and fell asleep.

Melissa started to dream. In the dream, she was wearing a lavender gown and was walking outside of the fence in front of the house. She made a right turn on the walkway. She saw someone standing there. It appeared to be a woman standing at the entrance of the porch facing towards the ground. This woman had on a yellow dress that reached down to her knees, and a yellow bonnet that was glowing in the evening sunset. She had something in her hand.

Melissa walked toward this woman. The woman was still facing down when she slowly handed Melissa a flower. It's a yellow flower. Melissa reached out to grab the flower. As soon as Melissa touched the flower, she woke up.

The next morning during breakfast, Melissa told Glen about her dream last night.

"Was it a nightmare?" Glen asked while sipping his coffee and looking at the newspaper.

"No, it didn't scare me. I wonder what it meant." Melissa said.

"We will talk later. I've have to go to this interview at the Jewelry store, see you later", Glen said as he kissed his wife goodbye.

Melissa went to the garden to water the flowers and noticed the patch of yellow daffodils. "Daffodils?" she said to herself, remembering the yellow flower in her dream. "Was that the flower in my dream?" She thought while she finished watering the garden.

Later, Glen gets home from his interview. He told Melissa that he felt good about it.

"I think it's going to be great. I hope the man calls me back for the job", Glen said with a smile.

"So what did you do today?" Glen asked.

"I watered the garden and noticed the yellow daffodils. I think that's what the woman gave me in my dream last night." Melissa said.

"Well, now you know what the flower is. Maybe the dream was just telling you to notice the flower. Look, you're overthinking this whole thing. You're going to drive yourself crazy trying to figure out the meaning of this dream. Let it go." Glen said as he marched into the bedroom.

Melissa thought that Glen was not understanding of how important this was to her. But he's right, it's just a dream. What's the big deal? So she went into the bedroom and gets ready for bed.

That night, Melissa was lying in the bed stared at the ceiling, dismissing her thoughts of the day, and then she falls asleep.

Melissa started dreaming again.

In the dream, she was walking past the fence of the house and made the turn onto the walkway and there was the woman in yellow facing down. This time her hands are closed together. Melissa walked up to the woman and held out her hands. The woman open her

palms and there glimmered a bright ball of light, so bright that it illuminated the dimness of the evening. The woman placed it into Melissa's hands. As Melissa looked at this light, her eyes became wide and she tried to see this woman's face. Before she got a chance to see the mysterious Lady's face, she woke up.

The next morning at breakfast, Melissa was very quiet.

Without saying a word to Glen, Melissa goes outside to water the garden as routine.

Back in the house, Glen was still sitting at the table. She passed by him and goes into the bedroom to read the newspaper.

Glen, thinking about his comment the other last night, thought that Melissa was upset with him. He wanted to surprise her with flowers. He goes to the garden and sees the yellow daffodils. So he plucked the daffodils out of the garden and quietly walked into the house. He tip toed to the

dinette table and puts the flowers in the vase.

When Melissa stepped out of the room, she saw the yellow daffodils in the vase on the table. Glen is sitting on the opposite side of the table smiling.

"Honey, tell me that you didn't pull those flowers out of my Aunts garden?" Melissa asked in a stern voice.

"Well, I thought that you would like the flowers, so I placed them on the table. I brought them in for you." Glen explains.

"Why did you pull those flowers? My Aunt told me never pull those flowers." Melissa yells as she takes the vase and run out the door.

Glen ran behind her saying "Wait, where are you going?"

"I have to plant the flowers back in. My Aunt said it's not the time." Melissa says.

"What is wrong with you?" Glen says.

Melissa goes to the garden with the vase of flowers and with both hands she starts

digging in the patch where the yellow daffodils were.

While she was digging she stomped her finger on something hard. "Ouch!" she screamed.

Glen asked, "What is it?" He puts his hand into the soil and wrapped his hand around the hard object and pulls it out.

Glen dusted it off. They both looked at the object. It's shinned like sunlight. They both realize that they have struck Gold.

It's a Gold nugget.

The couple took the nugget to the jewelry store where Glen applied for a job. The dealer valued it at over One Million dollars. They looked at each other and in excitement Glen jumps up and down exclaiming, "Wow, we're rich! Honey, Can you believe this? Those flowers were gold."

Melissa says "So that's what the woman was showing me in my dream."

They both became overjoyed that they were not going to have to struggle anymore.

That night, after mumbling “We’re rich” for like the hundredth time, Glen finally falls asleep.

Melissa goes to the window and looks at the garden. She sees the woman dressed in yellow kneeling in the garden. The woman stood up, turned and looked at Melissa. At that moment, Mellissa recognized who this woman was.

It was her Aunt Dally standing there, smiling holding the daffodils in her hands.

Melissa excitedly waved with a big smile and exclaims “Thank you” to her Aunt dressed in yellow.

Aunt Dally waved back and disappears into the night air.

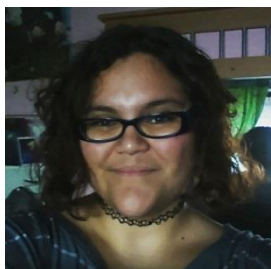
My Vote Counted

By Sue T.

It was an absentee ballot
I mailed it on October 25th, 2012
I personally took it to my local post office
I paid the \$1.30 postage
The ballot’s instructions read \$1.50 postage required
A twenty cent difference -- an issue, I told myself, to ignore
I watched as Mr. Postman stamped my envelope
I saw it dropped into the out-going bag.

Election Day was November 6th
I was feeling quite proud of me
For once -- I was early
It all went so well, yet, while driving on home
I kept feeling a little uneasy
Oh, hell!
Suddenly
It hit me just why.

I'd done something wrong.
With no one to blame
I felt so ashamed
You see, I'd forgotten
To sign my own name.
My vote counted, *or, did it?*



Toad and Mole

By Meagan Cahuasqui

Heel to toe, heel to toe, slow, slow, slow. I walked like a circus performer on a tightrope as I grasped the mug handle in my fingers, watching the top layer of marshmallows in hot cocoa ripple like the glass of water in Jurassic Park. Just one more step.

Mom came up behind me and grabbed the mug so I could settle in under the tree next to my brother. "Thanks, mama."

"You're welcome." She beamed and handed me back the mug.

I took a slow sip, and even though it still burned the tip of my tongue and roof of my mouth, I let out a satisfied, "Mmmmmmm."

Dad took a seat in front of the fake fireplace he'd made out

of cardboard and colored in with my crayons. Above his head, on the fake mantle, hung our stockings, held in place with push pins. From left to right they read, "William. Sonia. Daryl. Meagan." My name was in pink glitter.

"Okay, are we all ready?" Dad asked.

Daryl and I nodded. I laughed when I saw his hot chocolate mustache. "Shut up. You've got one too."

"Alright, dad, you pick your character first," Mom prompted.

"I'll be Rat," he answered.

My brother raised his hand high in the air like he was in school. "I'll be Mr. Toad."

"I'll be Badger," added Mom. "Meagan, that leaves you with Mole."

"Aw, again?" I pouted. "I'm always the ugliest one."

"That's 'cause you *are* the ugly one in the family." Daryl cackled and nearly spilled his hot chocolate all over his pajamas.

My mug was on the floor beside me now, and I crossed my arms and furrowed my brows. "Mommy! Make him stop."

Mom gave my brother the glare. "Daryl, be nice."

He rolled his eyes and shot me a dirty look. I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Hey, if you two keep at it we'll call it a night and put you to bed." Dad's stern voice always made us stop bickering.

I picked up my mug and took a sip. We all nodded in silent agreement to proceed.

My dad cleared his throat and started reading in his lilted accent. "Chapter 1. The River Bank. The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home..."

He read slow and careful, stumbling a bit on the part with all the *ings*. When it was the character's time to speak, he handed the book to me so I could read the dialogue. This was my favorite part. I put on a dramatic voice and

enunciated everything in my best British accent, because in my mind, Mole was from England.

We continued like this for the next hour, each taking turns reading from the old, tattered book. The pages were yellowing and the cover had tape on the spine to keep the cracking paper from peeling off altogether. We'd read that book every year on Christmas eve for as long as I could remember.

Each of us made the characters our own. My mom always gave Badger a grumbly voice, lowering her head to read as deep as she could. It always made me laugh. My dad's naturally higher voice gave Rat the perfect warmth necessary for the friendly creature. Daryl gave Toad a British accent too, but his was huffier and more manic than mine.

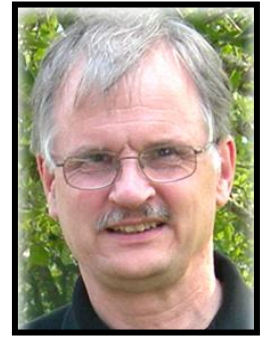
With ten minutes to spare until midnight, and my brother and I dozing off, Dad closed the book and called it a night. "Okay, time for sleep. You two have everything you need out here?"

Daryl and I nodded our sleepy heads. "Alright, good night then." He bent over and kissed each of us on the forehead.

My mom helped us into our makeshift sleeping bags with pillows and double blankets. Even on a tile floor, it was still pretty comfortable. We barely felt or heard her as she said goodnight.

They went to bed and turned off the lights, leaving only the glow of the Christmas tree lights and decorations as illumination for us. The sweet smell of pine filled my nose as I turned over to face my brother. "Good night, Mr. Toad." I yawned.

"Good night, Mr. Mole," he yawned back.



Not Serene

By Rick Weber

The winds of December blew snow across the path in front of them. Above them loomed the snowcapped peak of Mount Index and below them was the placid surface of Lake Serene. To Chad Li, this was a whole new experience. It was hard for him to believe that this majestic and remote scene was less than a two hour drive from Seattle. The sight of Bridal Veil Falls alone was almost enough to take his breath away. As a software engineer from the Silicon Valley, he spent most of his time indoors writing code for the latest computer applications. In his free time, he would go to Hawaii for time on the beach where the Pacific waters were warm. This was before he met Rachel Hampton, a shy, reserved market analyst who

worked at the same corporate facility he did.

Their chance meeting at a company softball game six months earlier had grown to a serious relationship. At the time, softball was the only outside activity that Chad did and only because his co-workers in the product development unit needed another person to fill their roster. Matched up against the marketing division in the first round resulted in defeat for Chad's team but not after he caught the eye of the woman with red hair and blue eyes playing first base. She tagged him out his first time at bat and proved to be a worthy competitor, better than some of the men on both teams. After the game both teams met for a few beers and Chad got up the nerve to ask her out. Of course, Rachel said yes.

It was close to Christmas and Rachel's family asked them to come up to share the holiday with them. Rachel told Chad that her father was an "outdoorsy" soul and would show them the great northwest. Chad could not decline her family's request

because his own parents were in Tokyo until after New Year's Day visiting his elderly grandparents. Chad acceded to Rachel's request figuring that it was time for him to meet the family.

Ahead of them on the path was John Hampton, Rachel's father, who spent a lot of time in the great outdoors; hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking. Both Rachel and Chad came up to Seattle the week before Christmas so that her parents could show them around. On the schedule was a weekend camping trip to Lake Serene. Although Chad did not have the necessary gear, John made sure that he was outfitted for the trek with a new parka, boots, backpack, and a sleeping bag before they set out.

In the morning they parked at one of the visitor centers and walked down an old service road to the beginning of the over six and a half mile trail to Lake Serene. After pitching their tents and setting up camp in an area not too far from the lake, John announced that they were in for a treat after

lunch, a hike into a not well known part of the forest where there was a lot of wildlife to see in their native habitat. Chad was a bit sore from the hike to the campsite and was not looking forward to more walking, at least not right now. The switchbacks on the trail had been hard on his slender but strong frame. After seeing the smile the announcement brought to Rachel's face, he gave his tacit approval. They set out on a path off of the main trail going southwest of Lake Serene up the slopes to Mount Index.

Along the way among the maple and evergreen trees, John pointed out a coyote to them who scampered back into the forest after spotting them. A couple of hours into the hike, John pointed to a bald eagle soaring overhead. The sight was awesome, watching the eagle soaring with the peak of Mount Index as its backdrop. As John was commenting to them about the eagle, part of the pathway gave way under his feet and he was sent tumbling down the rocky slope. Rachel let out a

scream as she watched her father plummet. Chad peered into the ravine and saw where John had stopped. "Stay here," he commanded Rachel, "I'll go and see what kind of shape he is in because you might have to go for help." Rachel shouted out to her father but got no response.

On the way down, Chad kept hollering out "John, John, John!" but heard nothing. As he got closer, Chad finally got a reply, "Chad, Chad, I'm over here. I think I broke a leg." When Chad got to John lying on the ground, he saw John's left leg twisted at an odd angle. Chad stood up and waved to Rachel who was barely visible up on the path and yelled up to her, "He's hurt but I think we can make it up to you." With that, Chad put John's left arm around his neck and lifted him up taking the weight off of John's left leg. Chad could see that John, a sixty year old mountain man with a mane of white hair, was in severe pain. One look into John's green eyes told him so without asking. "Besides your leg, are you hurt

anywhere else," Chad asked. John could only shake his head no. "If I help you, do you think you can make it up the hill," Chad continued. "Yes," John groaned. "Okay, then we'll do it one step at a time," Chad said. Before going up, Chad waved to Rachel and yelled, "We're coming up but it's going to be slow." This time they heard Rachel yell back to them, "I'll be here waiting for you!"

The journey up the mountainside was very slow and arduous to say the least. About every ten steps or so, they had to stop so that John could rest his good leg and Chad could get his breath. It took the two of them the better part of an hour to make it back up to the path where Rachel stood waiting. "It's his left leg," Chad gasped to her as he helped John down to sit on a large rock. As Rachel assessed John's injury, Chad took a swig from a quart bottle of water from his pack. "You have a compound fracture," Rachel calmly told her father. "Oh great," John groaned, "Just what I needed." "We were lucky to get you back up

to the path," Chad said to him, "but we are going to need help to get you out of here. There's no cell phone reception here. So, I'll see if I can at least get down to the main trail before dark. Hopefully, I'll be able to get some help or at least a cell phone signal." John once again could only nod. "Be careful," Rachel said to Chad. "I will," Chad replied as he turned to go down the path.

Retracing their route back to the lake proved to be difficult for Chad. The light snow which had been falling had stopped but the sky remained overcast with a light fog settling around the cascade. As darkness began to fall, Chad became lost. He decided before he became completely disoriented that he would go back to the spot where John and Rachel were waiting. Chad turned back on the path and then heard a loud roar from the woods behind him. Thinking that he may have spooked a bear, Chad looked back to his to see what may have made the sound. Just inside the trees, he spotted a large hairy shape covered in thick black

hair. He heard a second roar come from the shape which was too large to be a bear. Being unarmed, Chad knew that his only option was to run and hope that this creature would not pursue him. With that he hurried back up the path. In a short period of time, he finally made it back to Rachel and John. Out of breath and visibly shaken, Chad related the details of his encounter with the creature.

After hearing Chad out, John gave his comments in a painful tone, "It had to be a bear. If I heard something let out a roar behind me like you did, I would have been scared enough to think that it was ten foot tall, too. It may have been a female trying to protect her cubs. Did you see any little ones there?" "No," Chad replied, "But you may be right. It had to be a bear but WOW! It scared the living daylights out of me." "As it should have," John said in a soft groan with Rachel watching in amazement. "It'll be dark soon," John added, "We have to get a fire going and build us a shelter if

we're going to make it through the night up here."

As he sat on the big rock, John told Rachel and John to gather wood and brush to start a fire, as well as, evergreen limbs to make shelter for them to spend the night at the foot of Mount Index. With the fire started and Rachel tending to it, John gave Chad step by step instructions to build a lean-to of sorts for them to keep out of the weather for the night. With a nice fire going and their lodging built, they sat around the fire and dined on some granola bars and bottled water for supper. Even though John was in pain, he kept his spirits up by regaling Chad and Rachel with one good story.

"You know, Chad," as John started his tale. "That thing you saw earlier may have not been a bear." With that, both Chad and Rachel stared intently back at him. John continued, "The Pacific-Northwest has had the most sightings of "Sasquatch" or "Bigfoot", as he is called, than anywhere else in the country." Chad and Rachel then relaxed their

expressions and grinned at John, who pressed on by telling them the legend. "The first sightings of him or things like him here go back to the mid-nineteenth century. They were made by Indians to some of the first white men who moved here. They called these ape-like creatures, *skoocooms*. Some of the accounts have it that they possessed divine powers. Others said that they were evil. Whatever they were, the sightings kept on being reported for the past hundred and fifty years. A couple of times in the 1920's some miners reported being kidnapped or attacked by them. To be honest, I think that the miners had their incidents with the creatures after drinking too much whiskey that they smuggled in from Canada during Prohibition. In any case, the sightings continue to be reported to the present day. Chad, I hope you're not looking to become famous or infamous from your encounter this afternoon." Chad and Rachel both smiled and were amused by John's story telling skills. John's expression then turned

serious as he said, "However, if what you saw was a bear, I think that it is in our best interest to take turns watching our little bivouac tonight in the event the bear comes looking for food." With that John issued a watch schedule for the three of them for the night.

Chad stood the first watch which turned out to be quiet. A couple of hours later Rachel relieved him and Chad went into the shelter to get some sleep. Her turn started quietly but a short time into it, she heard a rustling in the bushes and saw the large hairy creature Chad had described earlier emerge. At first, she was stunned but was shaken from her trance when she smelled a strong putrid odor as she stood downwind from the creature. Rachel let out a scream. This roused John and Chad from their slumber causing them to come out of the shelter with John hopping on one leg. Before they could make it out to Rachel, the creature fled back into the woods. John, once again, told them that it was a bear which she had seen.

In pain and unable to sleep, John took his turn guarding the campsite early allowing Rachel to go back into sleep in the shelter with Chad. Not long after, John heard the roar again coming toward them from outside the encampment. This time, John saw the creature as described by Chad, which ran at him. John reacted by pulling a burning log from the fire and waving at the creature, which had a vile odor about it. This time, Rachel and Chad came from the shelter each picking up a burning log and waving it at the creature in the same manner as John was doing. The creature was apelike with long dark hair similar to a yak. The creature scared by the flames fled back into the forest. They succeeded in fending off the creature, hopefully, for the night.

Rachel and Chad gathered around John, who said to them calmly, "It wasn't a bear." Then, Rachel asked, "Well Daddy, what was it?" Chad remained silent looking at John and Rachel as each spoke. John chuckled and shook his head before

saying, "I think we just saw Bigfoot." Chad then asked him, "Are you sure?" John replied, "There are no other animals around these parts that fit the description of the thing we just saw. I don't know if it's man or beast. It certainly isn't a college kid pulling a prank on us. Nothing human could smell that bad." Suffice to say that there would be no sleep for any of them. They sat around the fire trying to explain what they had just seen.

It was now Chad's turn to play the skeptic. As an engineer, his schooling and professional career were rooted in logic. Everything was explainable. To Chad, the very thought of being visited by a mythical being was absurd. "If there no other indigenous animals fitting this description around here, could it have been some kind of exotic pet that someone let loose up here when they could no longer care for it," he offered. "That might be a possibility," John answered, "but the state enacted strict laws a few years ago banning private

individuals from owning any type of exotic animal. It does allow for them to be on game reserves but there are none around here. This area is nothing but federal and state forestlands." Chad could just shake his head trying to come up with a logical reason for their encounter.

"When was the last reported sighting of Bigfoot here, Daddy?" Rachel asked. "In this area alone," John replied, "There have been about a hundred in the past year. They're all over the internet. I tend to side with Chad. There has to be some sane, logical explanation for what we saw. I don't want to end up in the loony bin because I reported seeing Sasquatch." Both Chad and Rachel laughed at John's last comment. Their discussions, which went on for the rest of the night, were a search for reason not a philosophical debate.

As dawn peered through the darkness, no conclusions had been reached by the three hikers. As the path became illuminated, the discussion turned to making an action plan to get help. Chad once

again volunteered to be the one to go. "I wish I could get up on top of that mountain," Chad said pointing to Mount Index. "Maybe, up there I could get a good cell signal." "The climb up there can get quite rough," John said, "Mount Index, like Everest, has its own North Face. When I was younger, I scaled it a couple of times. Those climbs ruled out any intentions I had about going to Nepal to conquer the Big One. You're better off going down-hill." Rachel added, "Daddy's right. I tried that climb myself once but I never made it." With that Chad did not question the merits of going downhill any further and set out to find help.

Before setting out, John gave Chad some last minute guidance about the trip down to the main trail giving him landmarks to look for as waypoints. The fog, which covered the slopes the day before, had lifted and the path was clear. Chad found the landmarks where John had said they would be and he became more confident that he would not get lost.

About an hour into his hike, Chad heard rustling in the trees above him on the slope as he went down the path. This time, there was no roar or putrid stench coming from the direction of the noise. He picked up his pace but the rustling of the branches seemed to be getting closer. Chad was too far from John and Rachel to run back to them this time. He was alone and had to make a stand. He picked up some dried brush near his feet and lit it with the lighter which he had. The dried shrubbery caught fire immediately as he turned to face the noise. "Does this creature come out during the day?" he asked himself. His heart pounded and sweat came from his forehead in the cold weather. He waited for the creature to reappear but the rustling in the trees had suddenly stopped. Chad figured that the time had come for the final encounter.

His thoughts of a confrontation were interrupted when he heard a mechanical shaking sound from overhead. This was

followed by a rustling sound in the trees going away from him. He looked up to see a King's County Sheriff's helicopter hovering above him. He waved the burning shrub up at the helicopter and saw a hand wave at him from an open door on the aircraft. Fear suddenly turned into relief as a harness was lowered down to him on a hoist. He stomped out the burning brush and put himself into the harness. As he was lifted up to the helicopter, Chad looked down into the trees but he could not see the creature.

Inside the helicopter, Chad told one of his rescuers about John and Rachel. The pilot retraced Chad's route up the path and after a short aerial search of the area, both of them were located. John was still seated on the big rock with Rachel beside him. One of the crew, a paramedic, was lowered down in the hoist to tend to John, who was conscious but in great pain. While the paramedic tended to John, Rachel was hoisted up to the helicopter and reunited with Chad.

They embraced each other with Rachel saying, "My hero". Back on the ground, John asked the paramedic, "How did you know we were out here?"

The paramedic shouted into John's ear over the rotary engine's noise, "When the rangers saw that your car had been left on the lot overnight, they checked your campsite. After they saw that you were not there and the campsite had not been used overnight, the rangers called up a search party which included us. Now, we got to get you up into the bird." Shortly thereafter, John was hoisted up to the helicopter on a litter with the paramedic by his side.

Once inside the helicopter, John, Rachel, and Chad related their encounters with the creature to the crew. After hearing their accounts, the paramedic advised them, "You're not the first people we've met who saw Bigfoot. We fly up here all the time but had no luck ever seeing him ourselves." "I am glad that we're not the only ones you met who saw him. I thought you were going to

put us all in straight-jackets if we told you," John said. Everyone laughed as the helicopter headed to the Harborview Medical Center where John would be treated. As the Medivac flight headed to Seattle, John said to Chad with a smile, "I guess this makes you a member of the family now."

While the mechanical bird flew to the southwest, the creature, hiding near its den among the trees on Mount Index, looked up at it and roared.



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- J. D. Salinger (Jan. 1)**
- E. L. Doctorow (Jan. 6)**
- Zora Neale Hurston (Jan. 7)**
- Terry Brooks (Jan. 8)**
- Haruki Murakami (Jan. 12)**
- Jack London (Jan. 12)**
- Anne Bronte (Jan. 17)**
- Edith Wharton (Jan. 24)**

The Writer’s Group meetings are held the first Tuesday of every month in the second floor conference room from 6:00 – 7:30pm.

***Upcoming dates for 2017:**
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