

THE

PORTAL

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Great Glory



Edward White/CP Bialois

Hikaru Sato splashed a handful of water on his face for the tenth time since his arrival at work early in the morning. The first nine times he did so to help focus on the challenges ahead of him and to remind himself of the importance today held for him. This time when the cold water washed over him he'd done so to help calm his nerves after a massive earthquake shook the office building he worked in to its core. He couldn't remember the last time he experienced a quake of such magnitude and the radio was alive with news of power outages, collapsed buildings, and accidents in cities across the country.

Being far from the epicenter should've calmed him but his son, Daiki, was at school and would be heading home in the next few minutes. The thought of something happening to his son brought the anxiety he felt earlier in the day back a hundred fold. Their power grid remained active, their streets had only the smallest amount of detritus, and people were beginning to go back to their daily routine only minutes after their world had been violently shaken. The latter was true of the three men sitting in his office, waiting for him to return after checking on the building, and of course his son. Life goes on, was the saying the Americans liked to use. *Tell that to my hands*, he thought watching them shake uncontrollably. He grasped the side of the sink and willed himself to regain his calm. For several seconds he forced himself to take deep breaths and focus on his inner self. The ritual was as common to him as breathing. As a devout follower of Buddhism, he followed the teachings of Buddha to the letter. Never caring his wasn't a religion in the strictest sense, it was a way of life to better one's enlightenment and now he needed all of the enlightenment he could get.

As was normally the case, he began to feel gentle waves of calm break over him by his third breath. After seven breaths, he opened his

eyes, not realizing he'd closed them, and straightened his hair. Life would go on and he had the opportunity of a lifetime waiting for him. After another deep breath he turned away from the mirror and strode out of the restroom

The three men waiting in his office were the most powerful men in the city, some said even the country. As a twenty-year salaryman, he'd proven his loyalty to his company from the second he was hired. While others of his work pool arrived the customary two hours early to begin their workday, he arrived three hours early and remained later than anyone else in his office. For men such as Hikaru, their lives were set as salarymen and rarely rose above the middle class barring an unforeseen opportunity their superiors missed or that their skills greatly surpassed their peers. Hikaru fit into both categories as he understood the word of computer software better than his compatriots and his presentation of a potential problem to his superior impressed the man enough to allow Hikaru to do the same for the trio of executives visiting their fair city.

The rewards of such an opportunity were enormous, Hikaru could triple his yearly salary within months and accept a new position with less hours. The added free time would be a bonus that he planned to use to spend time with his twelve-year-old son. Daiki was a gifted athlete and student, but he took after his mother, meaning he craved attention. So far, Daiki had curbed his desires and maintained a disciplined outward appearance as their customs demanded. Hikaru knew of his son's issues and he would do anything he could to be with him more in the future. Of course, succeeding meant he would owe a debt of gratitude to his superior that would have to be paid. The man didn't have to allow Hikaru to take credit for finding the flaw before it cost the company billions to fix; he did so out of fairness and honor.

While everything was in front of Hikaru waiting for him to reach out and take it, the other side of his opportunity was just as great. Should he fail he would forever be relegated to his current position with no more chances to better himself or his life. The work would impress them; well... it would normal people, but the corporate world in Japan worked by different means than elsewhere in the world. To solidify himself in the men's eyes Hikaru would need to perform his greeting, presentation, and farewell in flawless customary tradition. While the rest of the world ran around worrying about tomorrow, the Japanese people took a great deal of pride in bringing the

computer age and their ancient customs of respect and posture into a marriage few outside of their country could possibly understand.

Hikaru took another deep, cleansing breath before he opened the door and reentered the conference room. The earthquake ended five minutes earlier, the earth had stated its case now everything depended on him. Once the door closed behind them, he bowed sharply with his hands tight to his side in perfect form. The three men watched him with approval then bowed in response. With the opening formalities finished he took his place before them.

As he stood before the three powerful men, his mind raced over his presentation, and the implications of what his findings would mean for the company as far as economical savings in the near future. His mind chose to wonder why he was there; he'd never been an ambitious man. In fact, he would've been more than happy if his superior remembered his name before his discovery. Remaining a face and little else did have a certain appeal to him, but instead he found himself standing before powerful men whose presence humbled him. Exhaling a shaky breath, he would prove his worth to his son and began his presentation with the beautiful view of the Pacific Ocean out the window to his left. The ocean's serene appearance belied the power of the earthquake that shook the island a short time earlier.

The three men before him ceased to be separate as they blended together in his mind's eye similar to a modern piece of art. His anxiety melted away as he worked through his presentation and his options on how to correct their issues. It was a speech he perfected in the early morning hours, timing it to less than eight minutes. Once he would finish, the trio would either agree and he would begin his work or they wouldn't and he would continue as he'd always done.

The men Hikaru was presenting to entered the room twenty minutes earlier with a measured gait, each one carried themselves in a way to remind Hikaru that he should consider himself lucky they took the time out of their busy day to see him. Indeed, Hikaru did feel lucky, in fact he owed them more than any of them would ever understand. Once he finished his presentation and the subsequent corrections, he stood waiting for their reaction.

Hikaru's heart threatened to burst from his chest. He imagined his ribs would shatter from the pounding they were suffering

from. The three men watched him patiently throughout his presentation, but he wasn't sure if they were giving their entire attention or were being polite per their custom. The only sound was one of them clearing his throat. Hikaru swallowed but kept his worries buried away from the eyes of the three powerful men.

The middleman slowly stood to his full height keeping his eyes focused on Hikaru, the other two watched him from the corner of their eyes. The senior and most powerful of the three, he would decide the fate of those in attendance. Hikaru waited as patiently as possible, he wanted to scream, to cry, to beg, anything to break the uncomfortable silence in the room. In his mind, he readied himself for the moment he was prepared for: failure. Never again would he be given such a lucrative opportunity after shaming his superior.

The three men, all dressed in similar black suits, remained passive. The two remained sitting and waited for the third to speak, their eyes turned to Hikaru but he didn't feel them. The eyes of the third man bore into his, the intensity in them was greater than he could've imagined. Hikaru wanted to flinch, but doing so would cause the deal to fail, his perfect presentation notwithstanding. He forced himself to hold the man's gaze, straining every nerve in his body to remain stoic.

With his decision made, the middleman opened his mouth and spoke one word. "Hai." Hikaru broke into a smile but quickly wiped it from his face. He was still under the scrutiny of the three men. He bowed sharp and precise as he'd done before; it was returned by all three of the men.

Alone in the office, barely two minutes removed from the hellish moment before with the trio, Hikaru stood with his fists resting against the small shelf running along the bottom of the window. His head was swimming with joy and surprise. He thought his presentation was great, but when he gazed into the cold eyes of those three businessmen, he doubted everything he told them. In the end, he remained standing from pure reflex. Both his mind and body threatened to shut down when the men left the room. Seeing his employee needed a moment to collect himself, Hikaru's superior left him alone in the conference room. Now, standing there looking out at the sparkling ocean he embraced the idea everyone was destined for something for the first time in his life.

Hikaru's smile slowly faded at the sight before him. The ships, both large and small in the bay outside his window became beached when the water drained away. The scene took a moment to register in his overworked and

exhausted mind. The otherworldly sight of the beached boats forced his eyes to remain locked on them. The tiny forms of people scurried about on the decks while others held onto the rails of the boat they were on trying not to fall to the hard ocean floor beneath them. Everyone on the boats looked around in horror. Even the expected sight of fish the receding water trapped flopping around was nonexistent. *They must've been scared away by the earthquake or...* his thoughts trailed off.

Hikaru felt, more than heard the gentle rumble of the tsunami approach. His eyes were drawn upwards and focused on the crest of the massive wave barreling towards him. He spent most of his youth watching the Godzilla movies, amazed at the precision used to construct the small cities only to have them be destroyed by an actor in a cheap lizard suit. He thought of his son, and how he would be beginning his walk home from school about then. The city was built on the lowland beach area; prime real estate as far as anyone was concerned.

Below him, the wave filled the streets then swept over the lower buildings. The force of the wave crashing into the side of the building he stood in terrified him. He couldn't remember what the building's earthquake strength was. Had it been damaged? If so, the wave would wash them away as it had half of the city below them. Despite his fears, the building stood strong, its lower floors were most likely flooded. The tops of other buildings were barely visible and the screams of people being pulled from the flooded floors below him filled his ears. His mind focused on his son. Daiki's school was several streets closer to the ocean and he would begin his walk home from school any minute. The weakness in Hikaru's body and soul made him weak and he collapsed to his knees. He had no idea what they could do.

WHY WE DANCE



By Etheridge G. Lovett

It was the evening of my quince birthday in Havana, Cuba. Although we were poor, Papa did everything he could to make my

fifteenth birthday one I'd never forget. Several neighbors, his closest friends, even some he never knew; brought Papa several chickens to cook. Wine and candy, smuggled into Cuba from America, were used to dress the old wooden table in our living room. Mom and her friends, aligned the table with bananas and other fruit, palm leaves, candles, and as many eating utensils as they could gather.

"Where's the music!" Papa shouted over to his best friend, Roberto Castillo. From the time I was a very small child, I always called him Uncle Roberto. Although he's not my blood uncle, he'll always be my Uncle Roberto.

"Relax... They'll be here any minute... You just make sure the food's ready. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse, and his stable," Uncle Roberto mused.

Papa laughed, saying, "The food will be done soon, Roberto... You don't have to eat Castro's horses..."

Mama smiled at Papa's remark and overall happiness. I stepped outside, inhaling the warm sea breeze. Each wind gust caused the thundering waves of the ocean to pound against the winding seawall. Barefoot children ran along the streets, playing games with whatever they could find. The wafting aroma of Cuban cigars intermingled with the pleasant chirping sounds coming from a flock of seagulls flying overhead. I watched the birds as they seemed so happy to be free. For a brief moment I wished I was a seagull. As I stood there watching the birds coast by, I could hear Papa's voice ringing in my head, saying, "Someday, Diana, I'll take all of you to America to taste true freedom."

Running my fingers through my long black hair, I smiled at the thought. But deep inside I knew that the Cuban government would make that dream a living nightmare if Papa dare tried. Knowing this, my smile faded fast.

"Here they come... They're coming!" Uncle Roberto shouted, pointing from a window of our home. I ran to the window and saw a candy apple red 1957 Chevy Bel Air, with five men and one woman sitting inside, neatly dressed and well-groomed. Uncle Roberto and Papa ran outside to greet them.

"I told you we'd come!" the elderly driver shouted with a grin from ear to ear. He exited the vehicle, hugging Uncle Roberto as if hugging a long lost brother.

"I can always count on you," Uncle Roberto said to the elderly man with his shiny hair slicked back.

Painted on the side of the vehicle were the words, The Famous Celia Cruz. When I gazed further into the vehicle, I saw bongo drums, tambourines and other seemingly well-used musical instruments.

"Welcome to my daughter's quince birthday party!" Papa shouted to the group of musicians and singers. He extended his arms, hugging each of them. So did Mama.

"Now tell me, where's the precious birthday girl?" the lively woman stepping out of the vehicle asked. Her skin was dark and smooth, but her hair shone like polished silver. Her joyful face; painted up with red lipstick, eyeliner, and long eyelashes; gazed down upon me.

"It's my fifteenth birthday," I said with pride.

"Come, give Celia a big hug, baby," she said, reaching out for me with her large, well-manicured hands. She pulled me close to her bosom as if I was her lover. I hugged her tight.

"The food's ready, everyone. Let's go inside and eat," Papa said. Everyone went inside, enjoying Papa's delicious cooking.

"This chicken falls right off the bone and melts in your mouth," Celia said to Papa.

"You're looking at the best damn cook in Cuba," Papa bragged. Everyone laughed at Papa's statement. We continued to eat our fill.

"Come on, boys, our flight leaves shortly. We don't have that much time so let's get this party jumping. It's time for some Salsa!" Celia shouted in her raspy, deep voice. Everyone helped the men unload the car and set up their musical equipment inside our home. With a loud shout, Celia began singing, swaying to the beat of the bongo drums. I grinned as the Salsa music painted colorful rainbows in every dark, dusty corner of our small home. Smiles were on every face. Celia sung aloud with an angelic smile on her face. My brother, Carlos, sat at the window of our home, watching out for the Cuban police and soldiers on constant patrol. But even he couldn't resist clapping his hands and stomping his feet to the lively music.

"Come, dance with me, pretty little birthday girl," Celia offered, with her arms extended towards me, her body swaying to the various drum beats. I was very shy and reserved so Papa grabbed me by the hand, dancing with me towards Celia. I began to blush. I tried to suppress my laughter, but couldn't.

"Go ahead, relax, laugh and enjoy yourself, honey. It's your birthday!" Papa shouted, dancing in front of me. I began to laugh at Papa's crazy facial expressions and funny dance steps. Like the seagulls flying above me earlier, I felt free with each hypnotic beat, while swaying back and forth to the Salsa sounds. Mama smiled at my happiness.

For several hours we danced until Carlos's shrieking voice pierced through the music, yelling out, "Cuban soldiers are coming. Papa, soldiers are passing by!" Hearing this, the musicians stopped playing.

Papa shouted, "Put out the candles, quick!" We quickly blew out the candles. Only the light of the full moon lit up the room. Everyone stood still in the dead silence. The truck filled with Cuban soldiers slowed, but then continued to drive by. The moonlight shining through a nearby window, revealed Papa's saddened, disappointed face. I saw in Papa's eyes the stress of knowing that his family wasn't really free to live in happiness. Drawn by sympathy and compassion, I pressed my way through the crowd, hugging Papa, saying, "Papa, I know you're worried about us, but don't worry. No matter where we are, as long as we're a family filled with love for each other, I'm fine."

I never saw tears stream from Papa's eyes as they did at that very moment. He kissed me on the forehead, grabbing a bottle of wine, holding it up high.

"I'll make this vow in front of all of my good friends, those whom I love dearly. I vow that someday soon, I'll get my family to America, to the land of freedom and opportunity to dance upon its freedom shores. It's there, in America, where I'll dance my own freedom dance. Here's to freedom!" Papa shouted, drinking from the bottle, raising it high above his head again.

"To freedom!" everyone shouted in the darkness.

Celia walked up, hugging all of us, one by one, saying, "Keep the faith... perhaps someday soon, we'll dance the freedom dance together in America."

"We love you so much, Celia," I expressed. Celia blew a kiss at me, smiling. She exited our home. I watched Celia step out into the bright moonlight. When Papa and the others helped the band load their equipment into the vehicle, Papa and Uncle Roberto hugged Celia and the band. He thanked them for coming. They boarded their vehicle.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," Celia said, sitting in the back seat. They started the car, driving off down the street. Those who came to my party began to wish me well. After we hugged, they headed for their own homes. Only Uncle Roberto remained, talking to Papa near the seawall. Every so often I smelled the familiar scent of the Cuban cigar Uncle Roberto was smoking. I sat on the porch steps with my brother, gazing at the large romantic moon, with its powder blue, soft light, engulfing Havana. Everything around us seemed to be bathed in its soothing light. Even the tall, swaying palm trees, dancing about in each wind gust blowing in from the ocean, gave me a warm feeling of comfort.

"It's time to go inside and get some sleep," Mama said. She rubbed her fingers through Carlos's curly hair, smiling at us.

"Mama, can we sit here for a few more minutes, at least until Papa comes in?" Carlos inquired.

"I'm afraid not. Your Papa and Roberto love to talk. They'll stand outside, talking until sunrise," Mama said. We stood, following Mama inside. Mama lit a candle, fixed a pale of water, cleaning Carlos. She prepared him for bed. I also wiped myself down for the night. Mama tucked us in bed, saying, "I really had a great time tonight. Maybe one day we'll get a chance to actually taste freedom so that we could have many more good times like tonight."

"Someday, Mama, we will. Maybe someday soon," I said.

Mama kissed us good night, blowing out the candle.

5:00 AM

I was jolted from my sleep by Papa's whispering voice, saying, "Diana... Diana, wake up."

Rubbing my eyes, I looked up and saw Papa, Mama, and Uncle Roberto, standing over me. Papa held rosary beads with a silver medallion of Saint Christopher, and a crucifix attached to it.

"The raft's ready and waiting further up the beach where soldiers and police rarely go. We're going to America, but we must leave now. Get up, Diana, grab your things," Papa requested.

I jumped up, grabbing a few things, which wasn't much, quickly dressing. I also dressed my brother with Mama's help.

"We can't wait any longer. I don't know how long my brothers will hold the raft near the shore. We must leave now," Uncle Roberto stressed.

"Lord, please be with us on this dangerous journey," Mama whispered with a look of concern on her face. Papa took a final glance at our home.

"Let's go," Papa said, leading the way. Under the cover of night shadows, untouched by the moonlight, we ran, while holding hands. As we fled across a large field, fear gripped my soul. I could also see fear growing on the faces of my parents, Carlos, and Uncle Roberto. We finally made it to a ditch near the side of a road.

"Keep your heads down, a military vehicle's approaching," Papa whispered.

Everyone lowered their heads as low as possible. Peeping through the tall grass, we watched the vehicle slow down. Its bright headlights shined in our direction. I could hear Salsa music playing from a radio in the large, old truck. My heart pounded so hard that I thought the soldiers heard it. I breathed a sigh of relief when the vehicle continued down the road.

"They're gone...come on... Let's go," Papa whispered. He, and Uncle Roberto, pulled us up out of the ditch. They lead us onward across the two-lane road. I stumbled when my feet fell into one of the road's potholes, but Mama caught me. We scurried across the road, running beneath the elongated shadows of several large Cuban-Laurel trees. It seemed as if the field would never end until I heard the ocean calling us with the sound of its thundering waves, pounding the seashore.

"It's this way," Uncle Roberto said in a half whisper, while pointing. As we ran over one final hill, the endless ocean met us. The light of the large full moon reflecting off the rippling surface of the ocean looked like a scene out of a romantic movie. But it was real.

"Look...there they are," Uncle Roberto said, pointing with excitement. He pointed at his brothers waving at us from the shoreline. They held a large, makeshift raft near the ocean's edge. As we drew closer, I noticed that the raft was made up of inner tubes, empty sealed steel drums, wooden beams, and large plastic containers, covered with a plastic tarp. The raft was tightly tied together by several long, thick ropes. Inside the raft they placed jugs of water, fresh fruit and bread.

"Bless you, Alano and Delmar," Uncle Roberto said to his brothers. He hugged them tight.

"There should be enough food and water in the raft to get you to America. Remember, the ocean's very unpredictable this time of year so be careful out there, my brother," Alano said.

"We'll never forget your bravery, my good friend. Thanks for building the raft and supplying it for me and my family. Once I get to America I promise I will work very hard and send money back here for you," Papa vowed. He hugged Alano and Delmar. Alano thanked Papa, but Delmar stood silent with a strange look on his face. I noticed that Delmar had his left arm tucked inside his short-sleeve, plaid shirt, half buttoned.

"Sending money to me won't be necessary. You just enjoy your freedom; take good care of my brother, and enjoy your fine family when you reach America. That would be my payment," Alano said.

"Bless you both," Papa said to the brothers. Uncle Roberto hugged his brothers again and helped us onto the raft. He also hopped onboard. I hung my arms outside the raft, allowing them to dangle about in the cool waters of the ocean splashing up against the raft. Alano and Delmar began to push the raft beyond the pounding waves. Delmar drew near to me. My heart grew heavy when I looked into his reddened eyes.

"Keep your arms in the raft at all times, young lady, if you want to keep them," Delmar warned. He slowly removed his hidden shoulder from his wrinkled, yellow shirt. "I lost this to the vicious sharks of the ocean," he said, displaying a stump where his arm belonged. A cold chill raced through me when I saw the stump. I snatched my arms out of the water, cuddling close to Mama. So did Carlos. Delmar's words, and the sight of his stump, remained etched in my mind like a reoccurring nightmare. Mama grabbed me and Carlos, holding us in her comforting arms to calm our nerves.

With one final heave, Delmar and Alano pushed us further out on the ocean. Papa and Uncle Roberto grabbed wooden boards and began paddling away from the shoreline. Delmar and Alano grew smaller with each strike of the makeshift paddles in the water until the two men on shore vanished from sight. So did the coastline of my beloved homeland, Havana, Cuba. Moments later, loud gunfire erupted. I

saw several rounds pierce the water only a few feet away from the raft.

"Put your heads down, hurry!" Papa shouted, pulling us downward with his broad, trembling hands. Uncle Roberto dropped his head down also. Papa peeped over one of the rusty steel canisters, shouting, "It's a Cuban gunboat. They're circling around to fire again!"

I became nervous when I heard the gunboat approaching. Before the machinegun could fire another shot at us, I noticed a thick, white foggy mist approaching us. I felt a damp feeling upon my face, legs, and arms. The ghostly fog overshadowed our raft.

"They're not firing... The fog is too thick, they can't see us," Papa whispered excitedly. He kissed the charm of St. Christopher, and the crucifix wrapped tight around his hand. Then I heard the sound of the gunboat's engine lessening. Finally, the gunboat was gone. For an hour we floated until the eerie fog vanished, releasing us from its misty grip. Papa and Uncle Roberto grabbed the paddles and began paddling again.

"Mama, I'm hungry," Carlos complained. Reaching over, Mama grabbed a piece of bread, giving it to Carlos.

"Here, eat some of this," Mama said, handing me a piece of the warm bread also.

"Thanks, Mama," I said. I took the baked bread and ate it. So did Carlos.

"Let's rest a minute or two," Uncle Roberto said to Papa. They placed the paddles down, leaning against the large containers.

"Try some of this, it'll give you energy," Mama said. She handed Papa and Uncle Roberto pieces of the bread.

"My brother, Alano, baked this bread himself. He's a good cook," Uncle Roberto bragged.

"If he can cook this good, he's a man after my own heart," Papa said.

Everyone laughed. As we laughed, something struck the raft with great force.

"Sharks are all around us!" Papa yelled.

I huddled close to Mama and Carlos. Papa and Uncle Roberto stood up, grabbing the wooden paddles, striking at the fins of the large sharks circling the raft. One of the sharks

bumped my side of the raft, causing a container of water to flip overboard.

"Grab the food and water!" Papa shouted. We grabbed all we could without falling into the ocean. As I grabbed the container of water, I noticed that one of the sharks desperately gnawed upon one of the thick ropes, holding a section of the raft in place. Several empty containers drifted away from our raft. The large mouth of one of the sharks lunged upward out of the water, snagging one of the containers in its teeth. The top popped off of the steel drum as it imploded. I could see several rows of the large razor-sharp teeth of the creature, chewing on the container, submerging beneath the churning water. Fear, once again, gripped my whole being. Carlos began to cry.

"Don't cry, Carlos, I won't allow the sharks to hurt you," Papa vowed, striking the fin of another shark as it swam by.

"These sharks must be around twenty feet long!" Uncle Roberto shouted to Papa. He also continued to strike at the sharks, but they seemed too persistent in attacking us. I could see anger building on Papa's face. He raised the paddle high above his head, yelling with tears in his eyes, "You're not going to harm my family!"

Papa struck the side of one of the sharks so hard that it began to bleed. The other sharks attacked the bleeding shark in a crazed eating frenzy.

"Yeah, that's the way you do it!" Uncle Roberto yelled aloud. He and Papa paddled our raft away from the gathering of sharks towards safer waters.

"My God, we made it beyond the sharks," Papa said, laughing and hugging Uncle Roberto.

"Didn't I tell you I won't let the sharks hurt you?" Papa said to Carlos. But the shark experience was too much for my little brother to accept. He tucked his sad face in Mama's bosom. Papa laughed as he and Uncle Roberto continued paddling. For many long hours we drifted about the ocean not knowing if the currents would take us to America, or leave us floating about the Atlantic Ocean. The sun began to bake our skin like meat in an oven. Although we tried to cover ourselves and drink water to stay cool, the sun became our worst enemy.

"Honey, the water's running low," Mama said to Papa. She held up the last jug of water, which was half full.

"Lord, help us," Papa whispered. He stood up, placing his hands over his forehead to shield out the sunlight. He gazed across the ocean for land, but there was none in sight. Only the beaming sunshine could be seen, dancing upon each wave kicked up by the ocean's currents.

"Listen up, from now on drink the water sparingly," Papa demanded. He kissed the holy charm and crucifix dangling around his wrist.

"Don't worry, we'll make it somehow," Uncle Roberto said in a reassuring voice. Mama began to sing to lift our spirits. Her voice sounded as if an angel had come onboard with us and began singing. Just the sound of her voice calmed my fears, soothing my mind. Papa and Uncle Roberto sat back, listening. So did Carlos and me.

"Don't drink the ocean water, you'll become delirious!" Papa yelled at me.

"I'm not drinking it, Papa. I'm only using it to cool my skin," I said.

Hours later, the blistering sun burned even brighter like a tireless enemy.

"Remember, drink the water sparingly... it's all we have left," Papa warned. Sweat beaded from his face and arms as he and Uncle Roberto continued paddling the raft onward. Although I wiped water on my skin to cool off from the heat, the sun baked the dampness and brief comfort away. With miles of water surrounding me, I felt like I was floating on the sea of Hell in a steel boat. I knew that we were in grave trouble but I dared not say. I continued to hold my peace, watching in silence. With their shirts soaked in sweat, Papa and Uncle Roberto stopped paddling and sat down for a moment.

"I—I can't paddle any further... I need to rest," Papa whispered. Uncle Roberto sat down beside Papa but didn't respond. He only stared at Papa with bloodshot eyes like I'd never seen before. Then he slumped over in the raft, face first.

"Roberto!" Papa shouted, jumping up. He grabbed Uncle Roberto, turning him over on his back. He took some of the remaining water and dabbed some of it upon Uncle Roberto's blistered lips. Uncle Roberto didn't respond.

"No, Roberto!" Papa screamed, placing his ear to Uncle Roberto's chest. Mama and Carlos began to cry. Papa performed CPR on Uncle Roberto, but there was no response. Papa noticed traces of blood on Uncle Roberto's

pant leg. When Papa ripped away the cloth he noticed that there was a large, swollen bullet wound in Uncle Roberto's leg.

"Damn it, he was shot by the gunboat... My friend was shot but he didn't want us to know it... Roberto, don't you die on me now!" Papa yelled again, tears streaming from his weary eyes.

Papa's yell pierced my own heart. I broke down, crying like I'd never cried before. It was as if my own Papa was lying dead in front of me. For the first time in my life, the pain of death touched me. It has shaken the depths of my very soul. When we were all cried out, Mama's gentle voice broke the still silence, saying, "He's gone now. There's nothing we could do. We must have a burial ceremony and bury him at sea."

Papa placed the rosary beads with the charm and cross around Uncle Roberto's neck, neatly wrapping his body in whatever loose cloths we could find on the raft. Papa stood up over the body, saying, "Since childhood, we played, worked hard, celebrated together like blood brothers. Now death has separated us, forever. Roberto, I'll never forget you. You knew the cost involved with seeking true freedom and you took the risk because of your faith and courage. You will always be my brother, my friend, and my hero, Roberto."

Mama leaned over, kissing Uncle Roberto on the forehead. I also kissed him. With a slight heave, Papa pushed Uncle Roberto's body overboard. We all wept bitterly as Uncle Roberto's body sunk beneath the dark blue waters of the deep ocean. I could still see the charm and cross sparkling in the final rays of sunlight until it was seen no more.

For hours we drifted upon the ocean. Papa was silent and emotionally drained over the loss of his best friend. To make matters worse, the sun became even more unbearable. Carlos began to cry, saying, "Mama, I'm thirsty."

Knowing that the water was gone, Mama pulled Carlos's head close to her bosom, sheltering his face from the sunrays with her arm. She dipped the edge of her dress in the ocean, wiping the cool water upon his face. I felt as if I was about to faint in the heat, but Papa's voice startled me, shouting, "Land! I see land up ahead!"

I stood up in the raft, gazing over the rippling waves at the strip of land rising over the horizon. Tears of joy filled my eyes.

"Thank God!" Mama shouted, hugging me and Carlos tight.

"We made it!" Papa yelled, hugging all of us. Grabbing the paddle, Papa paddled as hard as he could. Mama picked up Uncle Roberto's paddle and also paddled. I held Carlos in my arms. The land mass grew larger.

Tall, beautiful buildings aligned its coastline. I saw people relaxing on the beach as if they hadn't a care in the world. Children built sand castles in the sand near the water's edge. Once we were close enough to the shore, Papa hopped out of the raft into the chest-deep water. With the remainder of his strength, he pulled our raft towards the shore.

Other men who saw Papa struggling, men of every ethnicity and color, raced from the beach, entering the water, cheering for us. They helped Papa pull the battered raft to shore. The women on the shore, with their hands clasped as if in prayer, gazed at Mama and me with a look of compassion as if they clearly understood what we've endured as women.

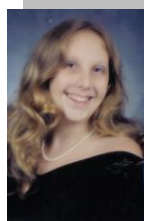
"Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" the people shouted, clapping their hands. Papa grabbed Mama and began his freedom dance upon the shores of Miami Beach as he promised he would. Mama wept as she danced with Papa. Tears also streamed from the eyes of all who watched. In the distance, I heard Salsa music playing from a radio held by one beachgoer.

The music brought back memories of my birthday party in Cuba. I hugged Carlos tight, enjoying Mama and Papa dancing with those gathering around us. Although I was tired, hungry and thirsty, no amount of water or food could ever satisfy the taste of true freedom. I gazed up at the seagulls, feeling as if a great burden was lifted from my shoulders. I was finally free as the seagulls. As the music soothed my thoughts, I danced with Carlos and the cheering crowd. I suddenly realized that our struggle for freedom and maintaining our Cuban identity is the true *reason why we dance...*

Excerpt from The Life and Times of No One Particular

Chapter Two:

It's all Greek to Me



By Jamie White

Sophocles once said something about how it was better to fail with honor than to succeed by fraud. Normally, I would agree with him completely, I've always hated cheaters. I hate them even more when a charge of mine ends up losing out on some great prize or opportunity because of it. That said, there are some times where a little sneakiness is in order and this was one of them. One of my favorite time periods was ancient Greece. Okay, I wasn't too happy with the whole slavery thing they had going on (what is it with humans doing that anyway?) and I really didn't like the place women had (or didn't, as the case may be) in society. Still, when it came to art? Very few can beat them! The stories they told then were the basis of pretty much every written work since not to mention their sculptures and other creations. For all their backwards ways in some areas, they were great innovators and it was a very stimulating time. To this day, I love to visit any museum that has work from that time period on display.

Before I mention the next part, let's remember that muses can be a bit egotistical, okay? It's hard not to be when you're widely known as the daughters of the God Zeus. Another thing I loved about the people of ancient Greece was, frankly, many of them worshipped us as Gods. They would call out to us in their plays and Pythagoras even got his people to build a shrine to us where they would bring countless gifts of all different kinds! He thought we could bring harmony; we were happy to oblige. There were even a number of cults devoted to us that continued for years and we loved it. Told you it sounded conceited! It was fun, though, and I can't stress enough how much I miss those days... My favorite time of the year, by far, was when they would hold the Dionysian Festival. For five days, we got to enjoy watching the works we helped inspire be displayed for everyone to see. They named it after a God of wine and other things that weren't considered "civilized". We put the idea

to hold the festival in their heads because they needed some fun in the worst way! They needed an outlet to express all the opinions that weren't considered "proper" to express publicly unless it was hidden behind a character. Comedy, Tragedy, Dancing, great food.... It was incredible! I kind of wish they'd been held more often.

Anyway, at the time I had started working with this guy named Heron. Shortly after that, I discovered his wife was far more gifted and decided to work with her as well. I thought she could easily beat any man in storytelling. Her husband was a bit unusual for men of his day and didn't mind her working on the stories I inspired her to write. He was her biggest fan. He would sit and read her stories for hours, in between putting a little work in on his own. She was much more open and would finish several stories in the time it took him to struggle through one. He did, however, have some nice ideas and a real dedication to his work, which I liked. Like many men of that time, he mostly made his living with his farm. With all the work he had to do to keep them fed and taken care of, I was always amazed how he managed to make time to read all the stories she was cranking out. Not to mention writing a few things of his own.

One day, Heron was reading a new story while taking a break from his daily chores. He raced through it, looking riveted by the words in front of him. I smiled; I felt that was one of our better efforts myself! He got up and walked into the next room where Alexis was busy with her daily house chores. He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. "Alexis, I am humbled by your beautiful words. It is far better than what I have come up with. Why do you not show it to others?"

"Heron! You cannot be serious! You know it is forbidden for a woman to do so." She loved that he supported and enjoyed her writing, but sometimes she wished he would stop trying to encourage her to do anything more with it aside from showing them to him. She just enjoyed telling the stories; she didn't need prizes or anything. Besides, she doubted that she had any real talent. She figured he just enjoyed them so much because he was biased. There was no way the public would enjoy them at all, especially coming from her!

"I'm quite serious, the Dionysian Festival is coming up, you know. We should try to get this one entered into it."

Alexis gasped. Surely, he had to be kidding! Even if her story was good, there was no way a woman was ever going to be able to enter the festival. They'd been going every year for close

to a decade now and she absolutely loved every second of them. It was one of the few times she ever left the house except for the occasional trip to the market. "What are you talking about? I just said it is forbidden!"

"Not if they do not know who wrote it. I could put my name on it and enter the festival myself! Imagine if your work won. It would be our own private joke and statement against an injustice."

Alexis could argue societal conventions with him, but outright disobedience was difficult. She'd been raised in a strict home where the traditional roles were firmly upheld. Her mother had rarely expressed an opinion her father hadn't expressed first and her grandmother had been the same way. She felt as though she had to defer to him, even if she didn't want to do it. She was uncomfortable with the idea of committing such a fraud. What if they were found out? She didn't even want to think about it! Still... there was a slight appeal to the idea of a woman winning one of the biggest awards without anyone ever realizing it. "Do you really think that my work is good enough to win the big prize?"

"I think it has just as good a chance as anything else that will be entered. Will you go along with it?"

His look was so hopeful and he sounded so excited about the idea, she actually started to get excited herself. "If you really think it is best, then yes. You can enter my play into the festival." She almost couldn't believe the words had come out of her mouth; she must have lost her mind. A slight thrill went through her body as she allowed herself a moment to entertain the idea of herself as a Dionysian winner. She could hardly wait for the contest to start.

Over the next few days, Alexis worked on refining her work before she let Heron officially enter it into the festival. Now that he had put the idea in her head, she was determined to make it as good as it could possibly be. I loved Alexis' dedication and openness to my ideas. She flew through the revisions and gave Heron the final version of her play. Ironically, it was about a woman who posed as a man in order to do something that was forbidden. The play was full of the social commentary that was so common then and particularly featured in the festival. Eventually, the word came; Alexis' play had been accepted and was going to be performed at the festival. Her play was a comedy and would be going up against several other wonderful writers. As she saw the names of the competition, Alexis began to get very nervous.

Was there any way she could compare to them? I tried to calm her, but I couldn't get through all the tension. The closer the festival came, the more nervous she got about both their deception and her prospects. Keeping the doubts to herself, Alexis did her best to keep a calm face around others. It was hard, but she managed.

Before they knew it, the festival had begun and music filled the air. Alexis and Heron spent hours walking through the grounds, listening to music and taking in plays. She watched each comedy intently, trying to determine if the writer had done a better job than her. She'd ask Heron what he thought of the others each night when they returned home. While he was complimentary to the writers and actors, he insisted each time hers was superior.

On the third day, the time came for her play to be performed in public for the first time. Alexis sat in the audience with her husband, watching the story unfold with growing anxiety. The actors were wonderful; she felt they improved her material. The lead was particularly good, the entire audience was riveted by him and Alexis thought he was touched by the muses themselves. She was right, I knew the muse who was working with him.

The actors weren't the only thing Alexis was watching. She wanted to see what the audience was doing as well. As often as possible, Alexis would glance around discreetly to see what their reactions were. To her amazement, people seemed to really be enjoying the story. They laughed so hard at several parts, it was deafening. She looked over at her husband and smiled. He looked so proud; she almost didn't care about the outcome. Alexis was just glad to see so many enjoying it and to know Heron was so proud of her. It was unlike any feeling she'd ever experienced.

A couple of days later and it was time for the winner to be announced. The town had gathered, anxious to see who would be rewarded. The excitement in the air was electric, she felt as though she were flying. Alexis took a seat by Heron and waited for the announcer to come onto the stage. When he finally did, Alexis nervously willed him to walk faster and get this over with; the nervousness was setting in and she was starting to wonder how the writers who entered each year could stand this! The man finally reached his place on the stage and announced the third place winner; a play called *Atropos* by a writer named Loukas. She clapped, happy that the play had gotten a prize; it was a great work. The second place finisher was another one she'd enjoyed called

Natasa, but she couldn't help but feel disappointed as the possibility of a prize seemed remote now.

"The top prize for comedy goes to Heron!"

Had she heard that right? She figured she had to be dreaming or something. Heron's joyful cheer erased the mental fog and she cheered as her husband walked onto the stage to claim the prize. Her story had actually won! This was incredible!

Later on, they were walking through the festival site, enjoying the few things that were left. They'd spent the last hour being complimented by almost everyone who came across them. They praised the play and laughed about the ridiculousness of a woman managing to pull something like that off. Alexis and Heron smiled and he thanked them. I smiled, too... If they only knew!

For the next several years, they pulled off the same trick and each time Alexis' play won some sort of prize. It took a couple of years, but Alexis managed to let go of any lingering guilt over their deception. When she thought about the fact her stories would never been considered otherwise, she couldn't help but feel justified. Heron was enjoying his new fame in town and his wife's success. He also felt a certain pride over the fact they were pulling off such a big con. No one ever did discover who the true writer is. To this day, the fragments of Alexis' stories are credited to him. Well, now the truth's out. I don't think they'll mind much...

FOREIGN SERVICE



By Rick Weber

It was the day he had been waiting for almost all of his life, the day he would be leaving the United States to live overseas. Sean Callahan had not been this excited since he was a boy on Christmas morning. Instead of Christmas presents under the tree to be opened, there were suitcases by the front door. For Sean, it was a dream come true, but for his

family, it was a bit of a nightmare. Their son was going to Pakistan to work at the US Embassy in Islamabad.

The dream began innocently enough starting out with Sean meeting Jagraj Wassan, or Raj as everyone called him, on his first day of school. They became the best of friends and still were close even though both had grown up and begun their respective professional careers; Raj in biomedical engineering and Sean with the US State Department.

Sean's parents both held down low paying jobs just to make ends meet. They had no money left to pay for any baby sitter or after school care for Sean. They were extremely grateful when Raj's grandmother, Gurnoor Wassan, agreed to watch Sean after school since she had to do the same for Raj and his other siblings while their parents toiled in the convenience store they owned.

As part of his agreement, and not one by his parents, with Mrs. Wassan, Sean agreed not only to do his homework with Raj and the other Wassan children every day, but also agreed to learn Urdu with them as taught by Mrs. Wassan. Mrs. Wassan had been a school teacher in her native Karachi before she and her husband immigrated to the US for better job opportunities in northern New Jersey. Mrs. Wassan wanted her children and now, her grandchildren, to maintain their Pakistani cultural identity. As such, all of the customs and even the language, Urdu the country's lingua franca, were still practiced in their home.

As it turned out, Sean was her best pupil edging out Raj and his siblings. Even when Sean got older and no longer required after school care, he came by regularly for his Urdu lessons. This immersion into the Pakistani culture made Sean more conscious of international affairs. In high school, Sean's academic prowess and passion for the world outside of his country, earned him a scholarship to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service.

At Georgetown, Sean was a Regional and Comparative Studies major with his focus on the Middle East and Asia. He found Georgetown to be tailored made for him. Sean took in all of the academic subject matter heaved upon him like a sponge absorbing water. To him; anthropology, economics, government, history, international affairs, linguistics, sociology, and theology were all interconnected. They were the instruments he needed to become a good Foreign Service Officer.

The School of Foreign Service with its close ties with the State Department made it

easy for Sean when their recruiters came calling for new employees early in his senior year. He took the Foreign Service Officer test, passed it, submitted his personal narrative, and had his oral interview. For Sean, the process moved like a well oiled machine. He received a level 4 in his speaking and a 4 level in his reading proficiencies of Urdu when he was tested by the State Department. This made him, an Irish American with red hair, a fluent bilingual speaker. With the current situation in Southwest Asia, it did not take Sean long to get an offer of employment from Foggy Bottom. He learned quickly soon after he was hired, and not to his surprise, that he would be going to Pakistan. After some additional training, Sean was ready to embark on the adventure of his life.

After some heartfelt hugs and tearful kisses from his parents, Sean's father helped him lug his bags out to the taxicab for the ride to Newark Liberty International airport and the first leg of his trip. After over twenty hours in the air over the next two days on three different airlines, Sean finally made it to his new home.

The early morning landing at Benazir Bhutto International Airport gave Sean his first taste of reality with his new surroundings. While the plane back taxied on the runway to the terminal, Sean noticed the heightened military presence on the tarmac. It was not just the contingent of Pakistani soldiers with automatic weapons that got his attention, but the number of US Air Force planes, which were present as well. Sean realized that he was in for a lot more of these attention getting moments as his tour in this country would progress.

Sean was met inside the terminal by Phil Brady, a political officer at the embassy who had been in country for just over a year following a tour in Mumbai, India. Phil, an affable Bostonian with a big smile, walked up to Sean with an outstretched hand and said to the new guy, "So, you're the wunderkind that everyone has been talking about."

"I guess so," Sean replied in a groggy, jet lagged tone. "Are you Phil Brady?"

"I am," boomed Phil in a loud voice. "Let's get you out of this place and into your new digs. We can chat on our way to the embassy." With that, Phil waved to two of the embassy's Foreign Service Nationals who were with him to pick Sean's bags. Sean was then whisked through Immigration and Customs after the inspectors were advised of Sean's diplomatic status.

The ride to the embassy was yet another reality check for Sean. It was his first

time in an armored vehicle, a Chevrolet Suburban with bulletproof glass. As Sean looked around the inside of the conveyance, Phil spoke up.

"You'll get used to not having the windows go up and down. This is the only way we travel around here. I know you're dead tired after your trip. I got your apartment set up for you. I won't go into anything weighty until after you got some rest, but there are some basic things I have to tell you first."

Phil went on to outline the items Sean had to know before he had his formal security briefing with the embassy's Regional Security Officer, or RSO, the next morning. The most important was that no one left the embassy compound alone and definitely not without permission first. The rest were just plain common sense. The ride to the embassy went by quickly with Phil doing most of the talking about life in general in Pakistan.

The ride also gave him a taste of what awaited him. He saw widespread poverty and even people living in tents outside of some local government buildings. He also saw a caravan of camels loaded with goods being led by some men heading out of the city. That sight to him was purely biblical. It was only the beginning. Both men and women were wearing the traditional Shalwar Kameez, a long shirt with matching trousers, the national dress of Pakistan. Some men wore a Taqiyah or brimless cap on their heads. All of the women he could see had on the Hijab, the traditional veil worn by women in Islamic countries.

The US Embassy located near the British High Commission is a fortress like campus, which not only contains the chancery building but also has housing and other facilities for its American employees. This differed from most other embassies, which only had a chancery building for its offices. The heavy steel fences and sally ports gave Sean the impression in his sleep deprived state that he might be entering a prison. He was taken directly to his quarters in an apartment building, which resembled many such structures in the US. Phil had the apartment set up for him, including a welcome kit with some pots, pans, and linens for him to use until his household goods arrived, which would be several months later.

"I'll let you get some sleep. Two days of doing nothing but being in the air or inside airports takes it out of everyone. I put some things in the fridge for you to munch on until you get over to the commissary. I'll be over in my office. Here are my direct office line and my cell phone numbers," Phil said, handing him a piece of paper. "Give me a call when you get up

and we can talk some more.” With that Phil gave Sean a pat on the back and handed him the keys to his new apartment as he walked out the door. The bed had already been made up and Sean crawled into it, falling almost immediately into a deep sleep.

Late in the afternoon Sean woke up and after a long hot shower, he gave Phil a call. “Good to see that you’re awake. I’ve got a couple of things to finish here in the office, but I’ll be over about six to get you. We’ll be having dinner at the American Club, on me.”

With about an hour to kill, Sean turned on the television and found it tuned to an Urdu language news channel. He found the reporting to be balanced with stories ranging from insurgent activities in the Northwest Frontier Territory to financial reports from Wall Street. He became immersed in the program and was interrupted when he heard a knock on his door. It was Phil. Sean quickly turned off the TV and walked out of the building with Phil to the American Club located on the embassy grounds.

After sitting down, Phil asked his dinner guest, “Well, what are you going to have for your first meal in-country?” Without hesitation, Sean looked up from the menu and said, “I think I’m going to have the Chicken Curry.”

“Good choice,” Phil replied with his ubiquitous smile.

While they waited for their order and sipped on local soft drinks, Phil spoke up. “You’re going to have a busy day tomorrow mostly with your security briefing and administrative in-processing. I know that you were told that you would be working in the consular section and that is still true. However, since you were hired as a political officer, I asked the powers that be to have you shadow me when you’re not working on the visa line.”

Sean had been told that all new Foreign Service Officers started out in the Consular Sections of the embassies so that they could learn the ropes of their new careers by dealing one on one with foreign nationals, but Pakistan was a different story. The current situation there pushed the junior officers to adapt quickly.

“I guess that was what you meant when you referred to me as ‘the wunderkind’ at the airport this morning,” Sean said in a calm tone.

Looking Sean in the eye, Phil responded, “You’re right. I want you to know

that I did my homework on you when I found out you were coming here. The person you are replacing had to have his tour curtailed due to a medical emergency. When I was told we were getting a gringo who got a 4/4 in Urdu that piqued my curiosity. To be perfectly frank, I checked you out and found out you were for real. I even read your thesis from Georgetown on Pakistan India relations, very impressive. I also found out how you learned Urdu. Not too many persons without roots to this region can do that. Even though English is used by the government here and there’s no language requirement for the post, we need all the resources we can gather. It amazes me that you weren’t wooed by the CIA.”

Now, it was Sean’s turn to grin. “To tell you the truth, I’m not a cloak and dagger kind of guy. I’m just happy that I got a job, any job, so soon after getting out of school. I also know that I have a lot to learn. So what’s next, *ustaad*?” as he addressed Phil with the Urdu word for teacher.

Their food was brought to the table and as they each began to eat, Phil answered. “The bosses have agreed to have you in the Consular Section in the mornings when they are busiest, and then to have you work with me in the afternoons. They also know that you have talent, which needs to be tapped into. I’ve got some things set aside I want you to look at. Tomorrow afternoon, after you’re done with in-processing, stop by my office and I’ll lay them out for you. Just to keep things straight, your desk will still be in the Consular Section.” With that remark by Phil, their business for the night was finished and they spent the remainder of the evening talking about a wide range of non-work related topics.

The next morning was spent in a security briefing given by the RSO, which was mandatory for all newcomers. Being that the post was in Pakistan, it was very detailed and meant to be taken seriously. As the RSO put it to those present, “We’re not in the ‘wine and cheese circuit’ of Europe. This is an unaccompanied post for good reason, but I think you all know the reasons why your families cannot be with you here at post.” After the briefing, Sean and the other newcomers were issued their embassy access and identification cards. This was followed by a trip to the Administrative Section to be issued their cell phones, which had to be carried by them at all times. Before going to meet Phil, Sean and the other new arrivals met with the Ambassador for a short welcome on board conference. After talking with the Consul General, the Con Gen his new boss, Sean made his way to the Political Section and Phil’s cubicle.

He found Phil busy typing on his computer when the secretary led him in. Phil looked up without stopping and told Sean to have a seat. A minute later, Phil finished typing and turned his attention to Sean. “Well, how do you like things so far?” Phil asked this time with a dead pan expression on his face.

“So far, so good, I guess,” Sean said with some hesitation in his voice and then added in a more direct manner, “So what do you have for me?”

Phil turned to an open Mosler drawer safe behind his desk and took out several files each stamped “Classified” with a “Secret” cover placard on the front. “These are what I was referring to last night. I need you to read over all of them, but you can’t take them out of this office for obvious reasons. In a nut shell, you know what our situation here is with the host government. We have to make some new inroads with our counterparts here to not only mend fences but also to set the framework for new policy with them. Last year, when I first got here, things were tense. To be honest, I thought that the Ambassador was going to do a draw down and send all non-essential employees back home, but things worked out. These files are divided up into three areas. The first one is all the things we’ve done here in the Political Section to document our progress with the Foreign Ministry. The second has background information or dossiers on the principle people we have to court in order to get things done. The third are the draft proposals from the Public Diplomacy folks as to how we should pursue things. I need you to get up to speed on these files ASAP. Got any questions?”

Sean had looked at Phil the entire time Phil outlined what he had for him. Again in a calm confident tone, Sean responded. “I don’t have a problem with doing any of this. In fact, I’m ready to jump into it with both feet but, I do have one question. What makes you think that I can do the job any better than people we already have working here? Some of the people I met today are not only of Pakistani heritage but have a lot more job experience than I have. They also speak languages such as Punjabi and Pashto in addition to Urdu. What makes me so special?”

Without breaking eye contact, it was Phil’s turn to reply. “When I referred to you as a ‘wunderkind’ at the airport yesterday, that was not a moniker I came up with. I was not the only one who looked into your qualifications when you got selected. The Deputy Chief of Mission, the DCM, was the one who approved of your modified work plan and he referred to you by that name. The decision came after an evaluation of who we had on staff, all great

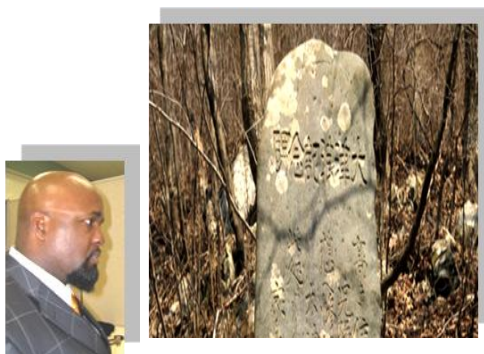
people. Everyone, including myself, had been here when things got strained. A fresh face was needed; someone who did not represent the past, but also someone who was culturally aware enough to get the job done. That someone was you."

Sean got the message but he did not think that he would get thrown into something this meaty so early in his career although he did dream a lot about doing work like this when he was a student. "I'll get right on it. So, what's our next step?"

"After you're up to speed, I'll take you over to meet our counterparts at the foreign ministry. The ones at our level know that we have to work on improving relations and they're just as eager as we are to get moving on it. Both sides have to show a unified front. This will not be easy for anyone. People used to say that 'the State Department made the world safe for cocktail parties.' During my tenure with this fine organization, I've never attended one, but have put in some killer hours to get the job done."

With that, Sean smiled and said, "I guess that I will be putting in some killer hours of my own." Phil and Sean each let out a good laugh as the sun was beginning to set outside the window by Phil's cubicle. Sean's journey was now well underway.

ANCIENT WARNINGS OF THE PAST



By Etheridge Lovett

In Sendai Kesenuma in Miyagi Prefecture, a cool pleasant breeze blew through an open bedroom window of Akira Tanaka's bedroom, rattling several small wind chimes strung neatly above her window frame. Hearing the distinct jingling sound, Akira's eyes opened to the warmth of the golden morning sun beaming through the silky-white curtains of her modest residence. The night prior, Akira spent hours by her husband's gravesite, weeping over

his sudden and unexpected demise. Because her husband was such a strong and lively man, Akira always believed that he'd outlive her... His sudden death made Akira acutely aware of life's unexpectedness.

Stepping out of bed, sliding her feet inside a pair of getas resting neatly beside her bed, Akira entered her washroom to wash her face and prepare for the anticipated visit of her five year old granddaughter, Sachiko. Her daughter, Sakura, felt that since it was her mother's sixtieth birthday, she'd allow her daughter the one day off from school to spend special moments with her grandmother. Sakura hoped the visit from her daughter would lift her mother's spirit in some special way. Akira's eyes were reddened and swollen from her long night of weeping. At one point, her grief was so heavy that she thought she'd seen an apparition of her husband with his arms extended, standing in the corner of her bedroom. But Akira later reasoned it was only a mere figment of her imagination running wild, so she allowed the thought of the spiritual encounter to fade away.

Akira splashed cool waters over her face. She heard the jingling sound of keys as someone was entering her humble home of pleasant earthen colors.

"Grandma!" a small voice cried out, breaking the still silence as the pitter-patter sound of tiny footsteps filled the home.

"Sachiko!" Akira shouted, grabbing her little granddaughter, pulling her up in her caring arms.

"Your face is all wet... What are you doing to your face, Grandma?" Sachiko asked in a bubbly tone when she noticed her grandmother's face dripping with water.

"I was preparing for your visit," Akira explained, drying her face with a towel. She grabbed Sachiko and held her close to her heart.

"Good morning Mom," Sakura greeted, kissing her mother's cheek, followed up with a big hug. "Mom, I'm sorry to hear you had a hard night last night."

"I miss your father so much... Being without him is so hard for me to accept," Akira revealed in an almost whisper.

"That's why I brought Sachiko over to cheer you up... I'll stop by to pick her up as soon as I get off from work," Sakura assured, hugging her mother and daughter. "Mom, I'm almost late... I got to go," Sakura blurted out after glancing at her wristwatch. She grabbed her car keys and headed for the front door, saying as

she left, "Sachiko, I want you to listen to your grandmother, okay?"

"I will, Mom," Sachiko replied, waving her mother off. Sakura waved at her mother and daughter as she exited the home, heading off to work.

"Grandma, what are we going to do today?" Sachiko asked.

"Once I finish dressing, I want to take you shopping to buy a few exciting things... We'll walk to the Sendai market to have some fun today, just you and me," Akira shared.

"That's great, Grandma!" Sachiko celebrated, jumping up and down, clapping her hands. Sachiko's explosive excitement brought joy to Akira's heart as she laughed. Akira gave Sachiko another big hug then helped her grandmother finish dressing to prepare for their peaceful stroll to the market. Grabbing her house keys, Akira glanced back at her home, smiling, as she exited the front door with Sachiko. Although a cool morning breeze lingered, the sun shone bright that morning. Akira opened her small umbrella and began her trek across town. The streets were awaking to the sound of honking vehicles and bicyclists, going about their morning business. Some people even carried supplies and other needed goods while making their way up and down the sidewalks.

"Sachiko, look, over there... that's the Masumune's Temple," Akira directed, pointing at the bright crimson red temple, aligned with blue designs along the edge of its arched, decorative roof. Several Buddhist Priest; dressed in bright red robes, stood on the steps of the temple, speaking to pedestrians passing. Sachiko waved at the priests causing one of them to catch her innocent gesture as he waved back. At that very moment, Akira noticed a large flock of seagulls, hundreds, if not thousands of them, flying overhead, squawking aloud as they soared inland away from the coastal area in a panic. Once she saw the birds, Akira's smile faded fast. She thought back on the time when she was a child and how her father taught her that this was a bad omen, that something dreadful was about to happen along the coast, to flee to higher ground.

"Come on Sachiko—hurry!" Akira shouted; her facial expressions of joy changed to that of worry and desperation.

"Grandma, what's wrong?" Sachiko questioned, reading her grandmother's face. Akira ignored her granddaughter as she pulled the child onward towards a taxi parked near a street curb.

"Excuse me, sir, please tell me—how much would it cost for you to take me and my granddaughter to the hillside?" Akira asked the taxi driver. When the man turned around, Akira saw kindness in his eyes.

"You don't owe me anything... Although I'm officially off duty, I'll be glad to take you and your granddaughter to the hillside... Come on, hop in," the driver answered, opening the rear door of the taxi for Akira.

"Here... please take this," Akira offered, handing the man a wad of money she had in her hand.

"Please ma'am, I don't need that... I'm okay, honestly," the driver replied, smiling.

"Thank you so much for your kindness," Akira nodded, shoving the money back inside her purse. She hopped in the back seat of the taxi with her granddaughter sitting safely beside her. The taxi driver adjusted his mirror then started his vehicle and drove off down the street.

"Let me formally introduce myself... I'm Takahiro Hayashi," the driver revealed.

"My name's Akira Asada... This is my granddaughter, Sachiko."

"Pleased to meet both of you... I hope you don't mind me listening to music as we ride along," Takahiro said.

"Please—go right ahead, I don't mind," Akira expressed, smiling.

Takahiro reached over and switched on a Japanese romance song. The sound of the gentle music filled the taxi.

"I can't believe it, that's my husband's favorite song... He often played that song many times in our home," Akira remembered.

"Your husband is a man of great compassion... This is a popular romance song here in Japan titled, *First Love*, by Utadah Hikaru," Takahiro explained, gazing at Akira through his rear view mirror.

"My husband was a great man, but now he's gone... I truly miss him," Akira muttered. Her smile faded fast as she thought of her husband.

"Ma'am, I'm so sorry," Takahiro humbly mentioned, reaching over to turn off the music.

"No—let the song play... please, let it play," Akira replied, smiling again. Sachiko hugged her grandmother as she rested beside her.

While they listened to the pleasant music, a strong jolt struck all around. A fierce rumbling began to shake the city of Sendai, Japan as if shaken by a god. The streets and sidewalks began to buckle and split, as trees toppled over and buildings shook upon their foundations.

"It's an earthquake... Fasten your seatbelts and hold on... We must drive away from the buildings!" Takahiro shouted, speeding off in an effort to reach a safe, open area. The small taxi swerved around panicking pedestrians, all running in many directions. Several buildings crumbled to the ground as others stood firm. But just as soon as the earthquake began, two minutes later, it ended. A surreal silence filled the air where the sound of loud rumblings once echoed. Only the romantic song continued to play on the radio until Takahiro turned the radio off.

Akira pulled her cell phone from her pocket and called her daughter. "Hello, Sakura, where are you? Are you safe?" Akira asked her daughter.

"I was driving to your place to pick up you and Sachiko when the earthquake struck... I'm safe, so don't worry about me," Sakura explained.

"No—don't go to my place... turn around and drive to higher ground—hurry... We're headed to higher ground in a taxi, most likely to the nearest bridge for safety... Call me once you reach higher ground," Akira warned.

"Mom, I'm turning around right now... I'm on my way to higher ground," Sakura alerted, ending the call. Akira watched the lights on her cell phone fade, as she placed it back inside the pocket of her jacket. Police startled them as they drove throughout the city with their microphones blaring, ordering people to evacuate the coastal areas.

The small taxi rounded one street corner as it came to a screeching halt, almost striking several downed poles. Air seeped from the front tires of the taxi after Takahiro mistakenly ran over large shards of glass and other debris strewn over the streets during the earthquake.

"I can't believe it—now we're stranded—we can't go any further," Takahiro explained to Akira.

"We can't sit here like this... We must keep moving to higher ground, don't you understand? If you can't take us there, we'll walk from here!" Akira shouted in desperation. She hopped from the taxi with Sachiko and began walking up the cracked sidewalks. Aftershocks struck, almost knocking Akira and her granddaughter to the ground.

"Akira—Hold on—I'm coming with you to make sure you and your granddaughter are safe along the way," Takahiro offered.

"I don't mind... Do as you wish," Akira replied.

Takahiro grabbed a few things from his vehicle, locked it, and ran to catch up with Akira and Sachiko.

"I don't understand all of the fuss about evacuating and reaching higher ground? We only experienced an earthquake and a few short aftershocks," Takahiro reported.

"Years ago when I was a child; my father drove me to meet several of his friends who lived up in the tiny village of Aneyoshi. There are many gray centuries-old stones erected there with writings etched upon them, warning not to build near the coastline due to tsunamis of the past. I saw the warning stones with my own eyes. One of the stones read, *'Remember the calamity of the great tsunamis. Do not build any homes below this point.'* This is why I am concerned... My father said that one of the signs of an approaching tsunami was if you see the seagulls fleeing from the coastal areas, flying inland by the hundreds or thousands, to flee to the ancient warning stones for safety. I saw this great sight earlier today... hundreds of seagulls flying away from the coast in a panic as if they knew something we humans didn't... Shortly after, the earthquake struck. That is why we must make it to the warning stones on higher ground," Akira explained.

"This is the new Japan, not the old Japan of the past... You said it yourself that those stones are centuries old... We haven't had a tsunami to strike this place in years... Why should we be terrified any further based upon old stones and ancient Japanese tales of the past?" Takahiro asked.

"They may seem like old Japanese tales to you, but such tales are real life to me," Akira said with sound conviction. The moment her words crossed her lips, loud sirens began to wail across the city of Sendai, followed by a loud rumbling sound of a million chariots from the coastal area. Akira and Takahiro turned to find a thirty-three foot tall wall of water rapidly approaching the city in the distance. Their

hearts pounded with great fear once they saw the massive wave approaching them. The menace of the ancient warning stones and Japanese folktales Akira trusted upon was now thundering towards them with an unstoppable fury. It was clear the once placid sea had returned to claim more lives, as it did in the past.

“Don’t just stand there—Come on—run!” Takahiro shouted, grabbing Akira’s hand, pulling her onward up the winding streets towards a tall bridge up ahead. Other residents of the city also fled on foot as some motorists could be seen trying to speed away from the deadly wall of water. Some rode bicycles, but all made a desperate dash to higher ground for safety.

Akira glanced back and saw the large wave lifting tall ships up as if they were mere toys, carrying them over the concrete sea walls into the streets of the city. But no man-made structure could stop the foretold wave, barreling in on the coast like a billion charging bulls. The wave rolled over the barrier like a muddy waterfall, dragging ships, cars, homes, anything that stood in its way, along with it... People screamed for their lives as the deep wave, filled with soil and debris, continued to race through the city streets, filling up stores, shops, and sweeping hundreds of vehicles and bodies along. The sound of electrical pops and other explosions filled the air as fire and smoke billowed up high into the cool skies.

“We’re almost there—run!” Takahiro shouted, pulling Akira and her granddaughter towards a towering bridge for safety. Sachiko began crying when she felt the cool waters flowing around her ankles, then her knees. Takahiro scooped the little child up on his strong shoulders as they continued to flee to higher ground.

“We’re not going to make it!” Akira shouted in a panic as the water rose up to their waist.

“Listen—we can’t give up now... We are going to make it!” Takahiro vowed, pulling Akira onward through the freezing, rapidly rising waters.

“Mama—I’m over here!” a familiar voice cried aloud from the bridge. It was Sakura and a couple of men, standing near her parked vehicle on the bridge above. The men tossed a rope from the bridge’s railing, down to where Akira was.

“I got it!” Takahiro shouted, grabbing the rope and pulling it towards them. He tied

the rope around Sachiko’s small waist and shoulders.

“Hang on tight and close your eyes now honey... Don’t open your eyes until you reach your mother,” Takahiro warned Sachiko.

“Okay,” Sachiko said, closing her eyes as she held on tight to the rope.

“She’s ready!” Takahiro shouted up. The men on the bridge pulled the rope and the little girl to safety while the waters continued to rise; its currents growing stronger. Once they untied Sachiko, the men tossed the rope back down to where Takahiro and Akira were. Takahiro caught the rope one more time, saying to Akira, “You’re next... Let me tie this around you!” he shouted over the loud rushing sound of the rising waters gathering underneath the bridge. Takahiro tied a knot and created an opening so that Akira could place her body inside. He fought the currents and swam closer to Akira. Akira fought to keep her head above water as she raised her arm, slipping her upper torso into the opening Takahiro made. He tightened the rope around her, saying, “Listen to me carefully—I know you miss your husband dearly but I want you to live on so you can take good care of your family... Family is everything... Promise me that you will be strong and live on,” Takahiro said, gazing directly into the sad eyes of Akira.

“I promise you, I will,” Akira said, weeping while gazing into Takahiro’s reddened eyes.

“Good... that’s what I want to hear,” Takahiro said humbly, smiling. He looked up and tugged on the rope. The men on the bridge pulled Akira up from the raging waters to higher ground, and to safety. As they untied the rope and prepared to drop the rope to save Takahiro, several floating trucks, cars, and other heavy debris floated around one street corner heading towards the brave man.

“Takahiro, look out behind you!” Akira and the others on the bridge shouted, pointing at the cluster of floating debris.

Before Takahiro could turn about, the clutter of debris struck him with several bone-crushing, deadly blows. Blood flowed freely from a gaping hole in the back of Takahiro’s head, as his life force drifted away.

“Takahiro!” Akira shouted with a gut-wrenching yell while running closer to the edge of the railing of the bridge.

“Takahiro—wake up!” Akira shouted from the depths of her soul as she fell upon the

railing, weeping aloud... Sakura ran up to her mother, throwing her arms around her, holding her tight as Sachiko also wept.

They all watched helplessly as the body of the brave man floated about upon his back. He was carried away by the strong under currents of the tsunami until he vanished from sight. Other victims were also swept away in the muddy waters by the currents of the restless tsunami foretold by *ancient warnings of the past...*



Note: One of the actual warning stones that were found in the village of Aneyoshi, Japan, had these words inscribed on it: “Always be prepared for unexpected tsunamis. Choose life over your possessions and valuables.”

AN OBVIOUS INJUSTICE



By Rick Weber

Bill Reems was an old investigative reporter for a large local newspaper. He had been at the paper for almost forty years. He started there fresh out of college on the GI Bill. Bill just finished covering a federal political corruption trial, which ended in the convictions of a city councilman and a building contractor on kick back and bribery charges and now, he was looking for something new to bite into. As he came into the conference room for the city editor’s daily “news budget” meeting, he received congratulatory remarks from his colleagues concerning his reports on the trial.

The city editor was the last one to enter the room and after congratulating Bill, he called the daily meeting to order. The first item

on the agenda was about coverage, which had gotten a lot of attention, not just by the newspaper, but also, by the national media, as well, of a shooting in which the defendant claimed self defense. The editor asked each of the reporters assigned to cover this to discuss what they have been working on in an effort to see how much of it would be used to fill the "news hole" in the following day's edition. The editor noted that a lot of advertisements had been sold due to an upcoming holiday so space was at a premium for their articles for the remainder of the week.

It came Bill's turn to pitch a new series of articles that had in mind to the boss. "That insurance fraud story I've been looking into is getting some traction. So far, I have at least two adjusters and five clients that I can tie to over a dozen phony claims which have cost this company a mint." The boss seemed to be preoccupied staring off into space as Bill outlined his proposed new venture to the staff.

In a dismissive tone, the editor said, "It sounds good, Bill, but I think we'll hold off until next week before we start running what you have put together. We have to put out more on 'the shooting'. We're getting killed by the local TV stations." The editor, in Bill's opinion, was too naive, too young, and too inexperienced, to have the job he now held.

"The shooting case", as it was commonly called by the local media; had received more emphasis than any other story in the last ten years, Bill thought to himself. The editor concluded the meeting by reminding his staff of their deadlines to get their copy in. Before he could get up to leave, the editor asked Bill to stay behind.

After the others had left the conference room, the editor closed the door behind them. This left Bill with a feeling that what the editor was about to say next he would not like.

"Bill," the editor started out in a quiet somber tone. "You heard what I said about the 'shooting case'. We need to come at the story from another angle."

"The last time I made a suggestion to you about a story, you told me that if you wanted my opinions you would ask for them. So, are you asking me now?" Bill retorted.

The working relationship between Bill and his boss had been tense over the past year when the city editor took over the position after working as a reporter at another newspaper.

"As a matter of fact, I am," the city editor replied in a quiet tone. Bill did not expect this remark and was somewhat taken aback.

Bill took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling for a moment before responding. "This story has been covered every which way but loose by more entities than just our paper."

"Bill," the city editor countered. "You've been around for a long time and you see what we're up against. Print media is being out done by television and the internet. We have to do it better and we can. We may have a 'news budget' to contend with, but time is on our side. We're not limited by sound bites. I'm telling you we're missing something."

It was the closest the city editor ever came to conceding that Bill had been right in his previous opinions. Bill did not have to ask why this all came out now. The paper had been having financial problems for a while. Positions, which had been vacant, were now being eliminated. To keep the readership that they had, new reporting methods had to be found and some old ones had to be resurrected.

Bill looked at his boss in the eye and simply said, "I think I may have something for you. Give me the rest of the day to flesh it out and I'll get with you after tomorrow's meeting."

With a look of relief, the editor said, "Go ahead do what you have to do and we'll talk about it."

Bill knew that he was given a tall order to fill, but from what he read on-line, not just from his own publication, but from the wire services and networks, as well, he saw a gap in the coverage. He left the conference room and went to his desk. He logged off of his computer and told his boss that he had to go out and check some leads. The city editor just nodded.

Outside of the building, he went to a nearby convenience store and asked the owner, whom he knew, if he could use his phone. He picked up the receiver and then dialed a number from memory. His conversation was short. He only told the person on the other end that they had to meet right away.

A half hour later, Bill was on what remained of a basketball court behind a vacant school building. The location offered the privacy he needed. It was not visible from the street and the security cameras which covered the premises in its heyday had long been removed.

A figure emerged through the gate and approached him. Without shaking hands,

the newcomer just said, "I was wondering when I would hear from you."

"I've been tied up," Bill replied and then he went on. "I came to talk to you about 'the shooting'. I want to find out the things which did not come out in the coverage."

Bill had used sources effectively his entire career and earned a good reputation with each of them. His sources came from all different backgrounds; ethnicities, occupations, social status, religions, you name it. This time he had a source with close access to the case.

"I can't tell you anything specific about the trial strategy. If any of it came out, it would come back to haunt me," the source laid out as one of the ground rules.

"Fair enough," Bill said. "But, I don't want to know anything about the ongoing investigation or the upcoming trial. I want to go back to when this whole thing first happened. When the guy was first brought in by the police, why wasn't he charged?"

Bill could see that the source was both tense and frustrated. "That part," the source groaned. "It was a mess. It still is. The prosecutor's office was called and they said there was not enough to charge him. It went all the way up the chain of commands for both agencies. In the end, the prosecutor stood and declined to take the case to court. From there, well, you know what happened."

"Yes," Bill remarked. "What did you think about what the cops had?"

Without hesitation, the source responded, "The case was okay. It needed some follow up work and could have gone to a grand jury, but that did not happen."

"Why not?" Bill asked.

"I know you've heard their reasoning," the source replied, which Bill was aware of.

"What do you think was really behind their decision?" Bill prodded.

With that question, the source blurted out to Bill, "They are lazy. They only want field grounders; nice neatly tied up cases with no loose ends which have to be argued. When this thing blew up, the prosecutor's office ran for cover and the cops took the heat. Now you're here asking me why." With that the source's bowed down looking at the pavement.

"I want to follow up on this. You know that I am fair and will put out both sides in my

copy. I just need to know now if you'll meet with me from time to time to confirm what I find out. Will you do that?"

"Yes," the source murmured and with that their meeting ended.

The next morning Bill met with the city editor, who was relieved to find out that Bill had come up with a new area to report on in "the shooting" case. It seemed to Bill that the city editor knew about this gap and wanted it covered. Bill was given free rein to continue.

The next thing Bill did was to see what exactly the prosecutor's office had done to come to their decision. He found out, not much. The source was right. The decision was made out of either ineptitude or laziness. Regardless of the motive, the prosecutor's office was able to wash its hands of the case.

The high profile nature of the case led to interest in it by both governor's office and the Department of Justice in Washington. Both entities were already involved.

Bill had already carved out his focus: the gap, the decision for the local prosecutor not to try the case or at least to take it to indictment.

The next thing for Bill to do was to look at what had been already reported. Among the materials he reviewed both printed and electronic, he found one article which stated that the top people in the police department and the prosecutor's office met shortly after the incident. That article alleged that was when the decision not to bring charges in the case even though the lead investigator thought otherwise. This article corroborated what the source told Bill but he felt that there was still something more to it.

Bill met again with his source at their usual spot. Bill asked, "What else do you know about the decision not to bring charges the night of the shooting?"

"Not much more than what I told you already," the source began. "The top muckety-mucks met. I wasn't privy to their discussions but what came out of it was the decision not to bring charges because 'the person of interest' was, in their opinion, within the law. With what I saw, I knew that they were wrong. At that time there was nowhere else to go. The prosecutor's office had the final say and it was disgusting. To me, it looked like they wanted the whole thing to go away by saying there wasn't a case. Well, as we all know, it didn't go away. It took almost month for the whole thing to blow up on them and I'm glad it did in a way. Now, at least something will be done. On the

other hand, the people responsible will not be held accountable. Sure the prosecutor will not run for re-election, but things will go on here like they always have; badly."

"Well, the governor and DOJ are now involved. Don't you think that will bring change?" Bill asked.

"Please," the source moaned. "Sure, something will come out of it this time but, for the long haul, my answer is 'no'. The governor is a political animal and so are the Feds for that matter. It makes no difference whether they're appointed or elected. The result is the same. The governor looks to getting re-elected and the people at DOJ are looking for their own self-interests; maybe judgeships or elections of their own. Hell, DOJ should be the last entity to watch over anything. They can't even clean their own house. They have one agency that let a bunch of guns go south of the border and did almost nothing to address the issue. Getting back to the situation here, to the governor's credit, charges were filed by a special prosecutor he appointed without a grand jury. That at least tells you there is a viable case. It will go to court, but our local politicians will just keep trucking on."

The source continued, "I don't know. It's up to you. You have the 'power of the pen'. I also know that you have your own limitations. Just do the best job that you can." With that, the meeting ended and Bill made his way back to the office mulling over the assessment which had just been given to him.

After listening to Bill's recap of the meeting, the city editor asked, "Well, where should we go from here?"

It was now Bill's turn to opine. "We gave fair coverage. We did our jobs, which is more than I can say for the state prosecutor. He made a horrible situation worse and nothing is coming out about it. Why should they be allowed to save face and go off quietly into the sunset? I want to put out something about it."

"You can. I think it's a great story, too," smiled the city editor, "Now, get to work on it!"

POETRY CORNER

AN Old Man



By Cavafy

At the noisy end of the café, head bent
over the table, an old man sits alone,
a newspaper in front of him.

And in the miserable banality of old age
he thinks how little he enjoyed the years
when he had strength, eloquence, and looks.

He knows he's aged a lot: he sees it, feels it.
Yet it seems he was young just yesterday.
So brief an interval, so very brief.

And he thinks of Prudence, how it fooled him,
how he always believed—what madness—
that cheat who said: "Tomorrow. You have
plenty of time."

He remembers impulses bridled, the joy
he sacrificed. Every chance he lost
now mocks his senseless caution.

But so much thinking, so much remembering
makes the old man dizzy. He falls asleep,
his head resting on the café table.

Get Drunk



Charles Baudelaire

Always be drunk.
That's it!

The great imperative!
In order not to feel
Time's horrid fardel
bruise your shoulders,
grinding you into the earth,
Get drunk and stay that way.

On what?
On wine, poetry, virtue, whatever.
But get drunk.

And if you sometimes happen to wake up
on the porches of a palace,
in the green grass of a ditch,
in the dismal loneliness of your own room,
your drunkenness gone or disappearing,
ask the wind,
the wave,
the star,
the bird,
the clock,
ask everything that flees,
everything that groans
or rolls
or sings,
everything that speaks,
ask what time it is;
and the wind,
the wave,
the star,
the bird,
the clock
will answer you:
"Time to get drunk!
Don't be martyred slaves of Time,
Get drunk!
Stay drunk!
On wine, virtue, poetry, whatever!"

Fragments of a Full Moon By Sheldon A

Streaming though my inner thoughts
Lurking through the cavities of life with dental
floss
The price of doing right doesn't come with cost
Bites from the cold lonely knights doesn't come
with frost.
Unforgiven pieces of puzzles leave puddles that
trouble the heart of broken art
Harps played from heaven sends angels
descending to sentence a lie that made a
shattered start
Tides of our brain waves slowly forced apart
Opening the eyelids of the mind exposing light
from dark
Blossoming a flower
Made of pink pedals shedding pollinated tears
In a solitude of fear
Haunted by thoughts of being trapped without a
care
Keeps her submissive to despair
Preventing leaves from riping
Bearing treasures like a pear
Consumed by fruits temptations in the eyes of
the snake stare
Has a flower climbing ladders trying to reach the
man upstairs
Let go of painful sorrow
Because the troubles of tomorrow
Only make your heart more hollow

Emotions never bottle
Tolerate what's right
Close your eyes and only follow

The truth shall set you free
Inner peace replaces sorrow
Dreams that money buy
Happiness being borrowed
Forgiveness is the key on the road to victory
By spreading LOV you leave behind your miser E

What is Man That He Boast or Brag

Etheridge G. lovett

WHAT IS MAN
THAT HE BOAST OR BRAG
FOR HIS YEARS ARE SHORT AND NUMBERED

SKIN ONCE TIGHT,
SOON DROOP AND SAG,
WHILE HIS YEARS ARE TORN ASUNDER.

WHAT IS MAN THAT HE BOAST OR BRAG
THE INEVITABLE, WILL SOON UNFURL

WHETHER RICH, POOR, YOUNG OR OLD
HIS SPIRIT WILL LEAVE THIS WORLD.

SO WHAT IS MAN THAT HE BOAST OR BRAG?

Haunted House

Joe Saba

In the house that grandpa left me,
I am wandering down a hallway.
Paintings stare like judgmental strangers.
I hear a knock on the wall behind me.
Empty house, so what's the danger?
I hear it loud, I hear it once.
"Who's there?" I ask,
But no response.
Knock-knock I hear again.
The rattling of the candle sconce.
Now I am officially scared.
"Who's there?" I ask,
But no response.
This night it seems will get much worse,
Who knows what ghoul this house does haunt?
In fear of this apparent curse,
"Be gone!" I say,
But no response.
Sheriff comes the morning after to investigate a
few reports.
"What happened here?" his deputy asks him.
"No idea" the sheriff retorts.
He hears a voice from deep inside.
"Whose voice is that?" he asks just once.
"Are you alive?" he calls out, panicked.

Sadly, though, there's no response.

Are You A Poet?

By Alejandro Cuadra

So my wife doesn't believe me a poet.
She has known me for more than a decade. Yet
she doesn't know it?
What the hell! I say to myself. Doesn't it ring a
bell? You don't need poetry in your bookshelf to
be a poet.
Don't you know it?
You don't need a poetry kit. Poetry is art. You
don't need a chart.
You just need to believe. Believe in your heart.
Just write your happiness or grief.
You can write long or brief. Write in your pants
or in your brief.
You don't need to be a magician to pull it out of
your sleeve.
You don't need to be a technician for poetry to
conceive.
Just do it any time of the year, on June or in
Christmas Eve.
Go ahead don't be afraid. You can be a poet just
have courage and believe.
You might need a dictionary to verify your spell,
and who knows your poetry might even sell.
You might be a poet and you don't even know it.

One Day a Butterfly

By Jeni Simon

A lonely little caterpillar am I.
All brown and ugly to me.
I try to stay with Mother Sunshine
But I feel too ugly and not wanted by her.
She beckons for me to come.
I stay in the shadows so no one will see.
It's safe here in the shadows.
No one can hurt me anymore here I say.
My light will give you warmth and comfort.
I'll heal your pain she says.
I'll help you pretty the butterfly says.
How can you help?
You're not like me.
I was once. I was hurt really bad.
I found the road that led me to what I am now.
Let me show you the way.
I'm afraid.
It's okay to be afraid.
One step at a time is all that it takes.
Be strong caterpillar and come.
The road is ahead, I see it now.
Be strong caterpillar and walk the road.
You'll be okay.
The real you is at the end.
I promise you that.
Once you reach that far,

Your pain will fade.
The hurt inside will be a dull ache.

I walk the road now,
I feel so alone.
I make friends with a bunny who also walks.
I see I'm not alone with the pain and suffering.
We help each other keep going on.
I know one day what awaits me...
I'll finally be the butterfly that I was meant to be!



What Life Is

By Juanita Mc Cleoud

Life is like the lily that weltered,
A grass root that is thrown,
The sun that rises,
The clouds that moves,
The sun that rises,
The clouds that moves,
An aircraft that flies,
The sun that shines,
The stars that twinkle,
A bird that fly,
A tree that blossoms,
A horse that gallops,
A baby that cries,
a mother that weeps,
a dog that barks,
a child that sleeps,
a marching band,
the last breath we take,
the end of life,
and endless dream,
an endless dream end to no where.

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