



THE
PORTAL

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HOLIER THAN THOU



CP Bialois/Edward White

Maxwell Hurt pulled the knife from the back of his friend's neck, taking care to wipe the bloody blade on the dead man's shoulder. With a quick flick of his wrist, the medium-sized pocket knife disappeared into his left coat pocket. Smiling at the ease with which he ended their dispute, he turned on his heel and exited the room in a few strides. Once outside, he closed the door then took off his dark brown driving gloves. Without any fingerprints, the murder would be difficult to pin on him. Of course, in order for the police to do so, they'd need an angle. Considering the language of their Pre-nup, Maxwell knew his wife would never admit to having an affair with his lifelong friend if she suspected him of the murder. He was free and clear.

He breathed the night air in deep gulps as he made his way through the shadows cast by the trees littering his friend's property. His car was parked nearby in a local parking lot without cameras or other possible entanglements. The perfect crime; it was something many wanted to commit but even fewer succeeded in. Everything was falling into place just as he intended. Now, it was time to deal with his wife.

During their marriage, Maxwell experienced the best and worst of times. The first was the day the most beautiful woman he ever saw agreed to be his wife. Over the years he never expected that feeling to be diminished even when they would have a child. Despite both of their best efforts a child seemed like a farfetched dream until two months prior. It was during a regular weekday morning when Maxwell answered the phone in his office. The receptionist was making a routine post procedure call to follow up on his wife's abortion. At first, he was certain the receptionist called the wrong number, but after confirming his wife's name and other items; he hung up the phone feeling as though he'd taken a punch to the stomach. It took him hours before he was able to think clearly and by then he was certain about what had happened.

His lifelong friend was the doctor that performed the abortion on his wife and he couldn't shake the feeling something more was behind it. He knew he wasn't supposed to find out. The receptionist's reaction at his change in tone told him that. Still, he loved Francine more than anything in the world and refused to believe she'd do something like that to him. Before he left the office he felt as though he needed to know more before he could look her in the eye. For that, he called the agent his company often used to infiltrate other companies to learn their secrets. Compared to the security between corporate rivals, finding the details of the affair and abortion was easy, taking no more than three days.

Until he received the official report from the man he paid an annual salary of over a million dollars, Maxwell remained aloof from his wife. The action scared her, but since he'd never shown the ability to be aggressive towards her, she did her best to ignore it. Since that fateful day Maxwell meticulously planned what he'd do to repay both of them for the betrayal they bestowed on him.

Maxwell found her in her usual place, sitting alongside their enormous pool with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. It didn't matter what time of day it was, she'd find an excuse to sit by the pool to get drunk. He sent the servants home early to avoid any witnesses. After changing clothes and putting the ones splattered with blood into the fireplace, he stepped through the double glass doors and into the cool night air.

If his wife sensed his presence, she didn't acknowledge him. She was so caught up in her own fantasy world she constructed around her that he didn't matter. The thought infuriated him, but he pushed the rage down. He needed to be as cold blooded and calculating here as he was with his childhood friend.

Maxwell strode over and took his usual seat next to her and stretched out. The lights from the house reflected off the water in the pool in an odd way, or so he thought. Lounging there, he closed his eyes and breathed deep the smell of the ocean. Their Cape Cod home was built three years earlier on one of the highest points they could find to overlook the ocean. Being so close to a large body of water made having a pool seem stupid to him, but considering he was worth several hundred million dollars, what was one indulgence? It wasn't like their house in Venice, Italy. To buy the home, they wanted their cost as much as buying a small country.

It took several minutes for his wife to say something. By then he was beginning to think she fell asleep. "You look pleased with yourself."

Always the saucy flirt. Maxwell smiled, but didn't laugh at his private joke. "And why shouldn't I? I have everything I could ever want." He opened his eyes to look over at her, but by then she'd already shaken her head and leaned back with her eyes closed. *Just wait,* he told himself, *you'll get yours.*

He laughed at the image of the look on her face when she'd find out about her lover. With no reason to remain by the pool, Maxwell swung his feet onto the ground and stood. He wasn't tired, but it was time to go to bed. He needed to keep up appearances. Behind him Francine shook her head yet again. She'd allow his eccentric phase, as long as he kept the money coming in, why wouldn't she?

The knock on the door the following morning came just as Maxwell expected. The police officers came to inform them of what happened and asked them a series of questions. They were the same kind they always asked on TV shows or in the movies and both he, and Francine, answered them as honestly as possible. Well, almost honestly.

Maxwell lied through his teeth when he talked about what a good man his friend had been. He even went so far as to promise to call the papers to offer a reward, a promise he kept later in the afternoon while his wife remained in their room crying. Everything was going as he expected with one exception. Why tell her what he did? True, it'd be a source of immense gratification to see the look on her face when she realized if she tried to call the police she'd be a step closer to admitting she committed adultery. Doing so would violate their Prenuptial agreement and cost her his money she so loved. No, he'd keep the secret to himself, if for no other reason than to hold out hope to her like a carrot to a race horse. When it got near enough, he'd pull it away, simple as that.

Over the course of the next six months, Maxwell did as he planned on the day after he committed his crime. Over time, people forgot about the murder and moved on with their lives. Everyone except for his wife, that is. He didn't think she knew he did it, but he was certain she suspected him. To that end he did everything in his power to discredit her in the eyes of everyone around them.

Francine's drinking quadrupled after the first couple of months resulting in a handful of drunk-driving tickets. Each time it happened, Maxwell paid the fine. He did everything he could to appear to be the supportive husband. Behind the scenes he belittled her and even blamed her for his friend's death by whatever means he could think of. Those he timed for when they were alone, there wasn't any reason to do it in front of the help. The last thing he

needed was a maid to tell the police what she heard, but he did let them hear some, just enough of their arguments so the staff would say he did everything he could to help his wife.

When Francine began using cocaine it proved to be an even better tool that he took full advantage of. Numerous times he put her into rehab clinics, even working with the doctors to help treat her. When she was released he did everything to help her, but he'd leave an old photo book out with pictures of their dead friend "by accident" and claim she dug them out.

Maxwell had won everything he wanted by punishing those who'd dared to betray him. He enjoyed watching his wife self-destruct before his eyes. No one would believe her even if she did admit to her adultery. He was above and beyond reproach, leaving only one final matter to deal with.

Over the last week or so he decided she had learned her lesson so he worked to help her clean herself up one final time. This time she looked like she was going to succeed. For the first time in months Maxwell was happy for her. Over the previous months her mind went through so many peaks and valleys. He was certain she would question everything he'd said to her over the previous months to push her over the edge. It was either that or spend the rest of her life on the street or in a clinic. He was certain her mind wasn't too far gone to avoid either of those options.

"Max? Can we talk?" She stopped a couple of feet from where Maxwell sat.

"About? " Sitting there looking over the beautiful view below him, Maxwell didn't expect her to come so close to him, it was something she avoided over the last few months.

Francine Hurt dropped into the chair off to the side of where he was sitting and fidgeted with her one hand, but kept the other at her side, partially hidden behind her. A month earlier he would've fought the urge to laugh at her being so pathetic, now he viewed her as a broken horse he now had to retrain.

"I miss Robbie."

He nodded, "So do I. He was a good friend."

She sat there, swaying side to side as if she was on a boat. "Why did he have to die?"

He shrugged, "Why do any of us? I wish I could change what happened."

"Do... do you mean it?" Her voice was meek; this was something they talked about when she was drinking and on drugs. Now that she was coherent, he wanted to rebuild her the right way.

He nodded, "Sure I do. We grew up together." Something about her demeanor gave him pause. "Why do you ask?"

She didn't answer at first but after a minute she looked at him. "I just... I thought you might've killed him."

Fear and laughter tried to force their way to the forefront, but he pushed them back. It wasn't that he didn't expect her to say that at some point, he just didn't think she would do it clean. "Me? Why would I do such a thing?" He tried to sound surprised instead of angry like others would've expected him at such an accusation. He was trying to help her, after all.

When she didn't answer, he felt a tingle at the base of his neck. It was a warning he used to get when the person across from him at the negotiating table was trying to pull something. For the first time he noticed she only had one hand where he could see it. His face screwed into a mask of confusion. "What's gotten into you?" He watched her, more worried than curious.

Her calm demeanor disappeared as she began shrieking, "You took him from me!" She raised her hands above her head revealing a pair of scissors she'd been hiding from him.

Maxwell rolled off the side of his chair away from her. "Francine... honey... put that down." He tried to remain calm, but his racing heart refused to slow down. *How'd she find out?*

"Why did you take him away from me? I never would've left you!" She remained where she was, holding the scissors above her head as if to strike.

This was the first time she ever threatened him with violence. Despite the fact she wasn't moving towards him, he realized she truly believed he did. For the first time he was scared as he looked into the craziness of her eyes.

He wiped sweat from around his mouth, "How dare... you..." Maxwell's voice trailed off. Pain erupted throughout his chest causing him to fall, hitting the stone floor with a sickening thud.

Seeing her husband convulsing on the floor, Francine forgot her anger and burst into laughter. Her tormentor for the last six months was dying and she couldn't stop laughing. In her twisted mind she wanted to see him die, to see

her freedom come to her with the last of his breath. She moved around the chair to better see him, but tripped over his leg, sending herself sprawling onto the floor next to him.

When she landed, a sharp stab of pain pierced her chest. She didn't have any idea what had happened, but she somehow knew she was about to die. She tried to crawl towards the phone to call for help, but she was only able to pull herself a couple of inches before darkness overtook her. Her final thoughts before she died were, this wasn't fair.

Their bodies were discovered by the maid an hour later when she came back from running errands. After she called the police, she told them how patient and loving Maxwell was to his wife, and how she threw it back in his face time and time again. Predictably, the police investigation was brief, but thorough. Both incidents were labeled an accident as Maxwell suffered a massive heart attack and his wife tripped trying to reach the phone. The detectives thought it ironic how she managed to impale herself in the heart with the scissors. The tragedy the family suffered through the past year was finally at an end. It was a shame the tabloids wouldn't let them rest in peace as conspiracy theories bounced around the internet.

THE DOLL MAKER



By Etheridge G. Lovett

"Good afternoon, Mr. Garrison... I thought you forgot all about the doll you ordered," said Felix Klein, an old doll maker.

"I'm sorry for being late, but I had to settle a few matters on the job before leaving, but I'm here to pick up the doll I ordered," Peter Garrison said, entering the cluttered antique doll store. Handcrafted dolls of various shapes, sizes and colors, sat upon rows of wooden shelves like children sitting at a sporting event.

I've been sitting by this window waiting hours for you to arrive... I just put the finishing touches on your doll... I think you'll like it," Felix said.

"Mr. Klein, I sure appreciate your fine craftsmanship... This gift is far too special for me to forget," Peter said, approaching the box on the table near the doll maker.

"You can open it... Go on, it won't bite... It's only a toy doll," Felix said, pointing at the box.

"With much pleasure," Peter replied as a warm smile crested across his face. When he lifted the lid of the box and pulled back the soft wrapping paper, Peter's eyes fell upon a well-crafted doll made in the image of a clown. The clown was chubby with a wide smile, painted up blink-less green eyes that seemed real, forever staring. Centered on its nose was a bright red ball. Its cheeks were round, plump and reddened; the same color as its lips. Its eyebrows were thin and arched higher than normal. Light red puffs of hair surrounded his balding head. He wore black and white striped overalls and small black shoes that widened at the toes. His shirt was bright red with white polka dots.

"Wow—this is definitely the work of a master doll maker." Peter praised. "Mr. Klein, I must admit, your work is remarkably superb. The doll looks so real," Peter said, picking up the doll from the box, holding it up close to a small light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

"I thought you'd fall in love with my precious doll. I put my heart and soul into that one... That will be the last doll these old wrinkled hands will ever make here in the United States. It's time to move on, especially after hearing about the recent rash of robberies and murders in this town," Felix said.

"The sad part about it is that police still haven't caught up with the killers. That's somewhat of a mystery in itself. The police don't know what to make of the bloody murders. All they know is that it's the work of three robbers, breaking into homes and killing those inside before making off with their valuable belongings. Whoever's behind it, they're as sick as the day they were born," Peter said.

"Well, all I know is that it's time to close down this old doll shop and leave this town behind me before things get worse. I'm quite sure the robbers will get what's coming to them soon. I swear if it wasn't for you telling me that your son was sickly and crippled, I probably would have packed up by now. Only for your son's sake did I hang around to create this final special doll," Felix revealed.

Peter placed the doll back inside the box as he replied, "I truly thank you for your kindness towards my son, Mr. Klein. I sure hate to hear that you're leaving us. This town will

certainly miss your presence if you were to leave, especially around the holidays. What will you do once you close down your shop?"

"Don't worry about me young man... I'll be just fine. I saved a few dollars over the years so I guess I'll head back home to Frankfurt Germany to be near my family and settle down there. Perhaps I'll teach some young child the skills I've learned over the years as a doll maker so my talent won't go to the grave with me," Felix explained.

"Well, just to know that your doll making skills will live on is good enough for me. I'm sure going to miss your shop regardless. This store is like a cornerstone in the community. I pass by this old shop each time I leave work just to get a quick glance at your latest dolls in the window," Peter said. He was about to place the top back on the box, but the doll maker stopped him.

"Hold on a second son— I forgot one final thing!" shouted Felix, startling Peter. He approached the toy clown sitting inside the box and stretched out his hand over the clown's jubilant face. Felix closed his aged eyes and whispered a few words in Latin. He then opened his eyes and smiled at Peter saying, "Now he's ready to go with you."

Peter was confused over Felix's sudden Latin chant, but the doll maker made him feel more at ease when he said, "Don't worry about my little prayer over my doll... It's nothing serious... I see each doll that I make as my own blood child. It's my way of blessing and empowering each of them as they go off into the world on their life's journey."

"That's unusual, but understandable... Here's the remainder of the money I owe you for the doll. I wish you much success on your future retirement plans," Peter said, handing Felix one hundred dollars. He shut the top down on the box and hurried out of the store. As Peter left the store, he heard Felix laughing aloud then shouting out, "Remember this, my doll is special... It will heal and protect you and your family!"

Paying very little attention to what Felix was saying, Peter hastened to his vehicle with the doll. He hopped into his car as he watched Felix approach the front door of the store. The doll maker stared at Peter with a look of contentment on his face. He smiled then closed the front door to his doll shop, putting an *OUT OF BUSINESS* sign up in the window.

Peter sped off down the highway dodging slow motorists along the way as he drove home from a long days work. He kept gazing out of his driver side window at the ominous clouds forming over the town. When

Peter turned onto his street corner he heard his name called, then a slight giggle come from the box.

"What?" Peter questioned in a whisper. He snatched the lid off the box. The doll sat silent, smiling, watching Peter as if it personally knew him. "I swear if it wasn't for my son loving clowns, you certainly wouldn't be sitting in my vehicle... You can bet your pretty little cherry lips on that one," Peter said. He placed the lid back over the doll. Peter turned onto his street, then into his driveway and shut off his vehicle. Head-splitting thunder and bright flashes of lightning greeted him when he opened his car door. Peter grabbed the box and ran to his front door. The moment he opened the door, his wife, Karen Garrison, met him. Her brown eyes were innocent to look upon. Her golden blonde hair and voluptuous figure was attractive. Karen hugged her husband tight, saying, "I'm so glad to see you made it home before the storm struck... The thunder was so loud that it rattled the house a few times."

"I don't know where this freak storm came from, but I'm glad to be home out of it," Peter said, kissing his wife on the cheek.

"Is that the toy doll you spoke of purchasing?" Karen asked.

"Yes... it's for Eric's birthday... Where is he?" Peter asked.

"He's upstairs in bed. He had another bout with his asthma and diabetes earlier today, but he seems to be feeling a little better now," Karen explained, tears rising in the wells of her eyes.

"Listen honey, cheer up... I know the doctors said he'd never walk again, but let's keep the faith for his sake. The more we remain positive around him, the more he smiles and his spirit is lifted," Peter said, comforting his wife.

"You're absolutely right... he no doubt draws his positive energy from us so we must maintain a smile, although his deteriorating health condition is literally destroying us inside," Karen said. They went upstairs with the gift in hand. Peter opened his son's bedroom door and noticed his child sitting up in bed, staring aimlessly out of the window as the rain began to fall.

"Hey there handsome young man, how are you feeling?" Peter asked, sitting beside his son, stroking his disheveled red hair.

"I feel a little better Dad after Mom gave me some medicine, but my body is still aching inside," Eric replied.

"Listen, I think I have something that just might make you feel a whole lot better," Peter said, placing the box in front of his son.

Eric's green eyes widened with excitement when he saw the box.

"Go ahead—you can open it," Peter encouraged.

Eric lifted the lid and saw the clown doll lying in the box. He picked it up and was taken by the clown's jolly smile.

"Wow—it's a clown doll and he looks just like the clowns at the circus we visited last week... I love him so much... I think I'll call him Charlie," Eric said, beaming with joy.

"Okay son—you can call him Charlie," Peter said.

"Karen kissed her husband on the cheek, saying, 'You sure know how to make our son feel happy.'"

"And you sure know how to keep both of us happy," Peter replied, embracing his wife and Eric in a family hug. The moment he kissed and released them, the lights to their home blinked out.

"Damn it—I knew it would happen... It's that freak storm brewing up outside. Let me call the power company to get to the bottom of this. We have a birthday celebration to enjoy tonight and nothing will stand in our way. Not even a storm," Peter said, picking up the phone. However, the phone was dead. "That is highly unusual for the phone and the lights to go off at the same time. I'll grab my cell phone out of my briefcase in the car and use it to call the power company out here to fix the problem," Peter said, bolting down the stairs. When he opened the front door to his home, three men were standing at the door grinning. Two of the men were holding sawed off shotguns in hand.

"Good evening neighbor," One of the men said, sending a quick hard punch to Peter's midsection. He buckled over in excruciating pain. The men laughed while pushing Peter inside the home on the floor. The men entered the home and slammed the door shut, locking it.

When Peter re-gained his composure he yelled, "Get the hell out of my house!" He bravely lunged from his knees, running towards the burglars when one of them struck Peter from behind with the butt end of his weapon, knocking him unconscious.

"Tie him up and toss him behind the couch. We'll deal with him later... One of you go and search the home to see if anyone else is here," the leader of the robbers ordered.

"I'll take care of it," one of the men said. He walked throughout the first floor of the home, knocking things about, searching every nook and cranny for anyone hiding.

Hearing the loud commotion, Karen emerged from her son's bedroom to check on her husband. As she stood at the top of the stairs, she was shocked to see several men standing in her home with weapons in hand and her husband lying on the floor behind the couch; bound and gagged. Karen hurried back into her son's bedroom, closing the door and locking it.

Seeing the frightened expression upon his mother's distraught face, Eric asked, "Mom, what's wrong?"

"Come with me—hurry—and keep your voice down," Karen said, tears forming in the rim of her eyes. She struggled to pick her son up from his bed and carried him to the closet as he clung to the doll. Karen gently placed her child inside the closet and sat down beside him, closing the door, locking it.

"Eric, several men have broken into our home so you must keep quiet while in here or they'll find us... okay?" Karen whispered.

"Where's Dad, Mom... Where's my Dad?" Eric asked in a panicky tone. He became upset, tears welling up in his eyes. Karen refused to answer. She simply held her son tight in her arms. She heard a loud kick against the room door, then another and another... The final kick gave the robbers access into Eric's bedroom. Karen heard someone walking around, rummaging about; tossing things all around the room. There was a slight moment of dead silence. Then she heard the sound of someone attempting to open the closet door. Karen held her son's mouth tight to prevent him from screaming as her heart pounded in terror. Loud blows were administered to the locked doorknob until the knob dangled inside the door's socket. The stranger yanked the closet door open as Karen shouted, "Go away and leave me and my child alone!"

The man with a thick scraggly beard and a cavity filled grin only chuckled then shouted, "Hot damn—you're a sexy looking one... this is my lucky day!" he reached into the closet, grabbing Karen by the arm, saying, "Come on out of there sweetie." He pulled Karen out of the closet. Her son fell out of her arms to the floor with the clown doll in his grasp.

"Stop it—my son is sick... His legs are weak and he cannot walk!" Karen shouted as she fought to get loose. The man swung with a

strong backhand, striking Karen in the mouth, knocking her to the ground.

"Mom!" Eric shouted, reaching for his mother, but she was too dazed to understand his cries.

"I'll come back and get you later—boy," the man said in a harsh tone. He grabbed Karen by the arm again and dragged her out of the room down the stairwell like one would drag a sack of potatoes.

"Well-well-well—look at the great trophy you've found," the leader said, approaching Karen and the man coming down the stairs. "Tie her up, gag her mouth and toss her beside her sorry husband until we finish gathering the goods. We'll have a little fun with her before we leave."

"You got it boss," the man holding Karen said, tossing her beside her husband, then tying her up and gagging her mouth. "Boss—I almost forgot— there's a scrawny little kid upstairs in his bedroom, but he won't be causing us any problems because he's crippled and sickly. The kid crawls around on his hands and knees like a baby. I left him on the floor of his bedroom holding some antique clown doll for comfort," the man shared.

"Antique clown doll you said? Are you mad? Don't just stand there, bring that doll down here and let me take a look at it. If it's an antique doll, I'm almost sure it'll fetch a good price on ebay," the leader said.

The other robbers laughed over their leader's statement. The man who dragged Karen down the stairs stormed back upstairs to grab the doll. When he reached Eric's bedroom, he noticed Eric was sitting up in bed with the doll in his arms and a strange and piercing stare upon his face. The man was stunned to see that Eric had somehow climbed into bed, although the boy couldn't walk.

"Hey boy, I thought your Mom said you were crippled... How did you climb into that bed without help?" the man asked. Eric didn't respond. He only stared at the man.

"Look, I came to get that little doll you got there in your hand, so hand it over—kid," the man said, approaching the expressionless child. Eric suddenly tossed the doll at the man. The man staggered about, fumbling around with the doll in his hands. Eric exploded in laughter as he watched the man's clumsiness.

"Hey kid—you think that was funny... I swear I'll deal with you personally when I get back, that's a promise—boy!" the man shouted, exiting the room. He hurried down the stairs to show his boss the doll.

"Here's the clown doll I spoke of," the man said, handing the doll to his boss. The leader studied the doll, front and back as he said, "Man, this clown doll looks real...and creepy... This is not your average doll. This doll was well-crafted and no doubt custom made by some master craftsman... see the doll maker's name on the back of the doll's neck, **Felix Klein – the Master Doll Maker**. His name sounds German to me, and I heard they're fine craftsman. Go on and put this doll inside your bag, we'll definitely sell it on ebay," the leader said. He tossed the doll over to one of the men holding a bag of valuable items they gathered from the home. When the man caught the doll, he felt a sharp pinch on his hand.

"Damn it!" the man shouted. He tossed the doll from his grasp behind the couch where Peter and Karen were tied up. He looked at his hand and noticed a tiny bite mark. Blood drained from the open wound.

"I can't believe this—Guys come over here and look at this!" the man shouted to the others as he held up his bleeding hand.

"What happened to you?" the leader asked.

"Something bit my hand, that's what happened to me, and it look as if it was that weird little clown doll you tossed to me," the man said. The other robbers laughed aloud at their friend's statement, but their laughter was soon cut short by giggling sounds coming from behind the couch where the clown landed. One of the men went to see what was behind the couch with his weapon aimed high.

"The doll... it's gone as if it stood up and ran away like a kid!" the man shouted with his eyes stretched.

"What do you mean it stood up and ran away?" the leader of the gang asked. He looked behind the couch and also noticed that the clown was gone, only Peter and Karen remained. At that moment, another giggle was heard coming from underneath the couch.

"Bring me a flashlight—quick!" the leader shouted. One of the other robbers handed him a flashlight. He dropped to his knees and lifted the bottom cover of the couch, shining his flashlight underneath. He noticed the doll lying on its back, maintaining its jovial smile.

"Relax... It's over here—I found the doll... It probably tumbled underneath the couch when you got all spooked and dropped it," the leader said, reaching underneath the couch to grab the doll. "This doll will be my money maker," the leader said, picking up the doll, gazing at the face of the clown doll. The man

panicked when the wooden doll turned his head and frowned at him, clutching the man's arms tight. The man yelled aloud in great pain as the clown's touch drained the life right out of the man, causing him to fall backwards, flat on his back with his eyes stretched wide in a blank death stare. The clown giggled again as he hopped from the corpse and disappeared in the shadows of the living room. Seeing this, one of the men dropped everything in a sudden panic and ran towards the front door in a mad dash to escape. The doll ran from the shadows of the room and dashed underneath the fleeing man's feet, causing him to trip. When the man fell to the floor, the doll hopped upon his chest and grabbed the man's neck, draining the life right out of the terrified man. The doll ran back into the shadows of the living room.

"Frank—Harold!" the last robber called out as he ran to check on his friends, but learned they had no pulse. He then heard another giggling sound come from all areas of the dimly lit room.

"Damn you, little doll!" the robber yelled. He grabbed the bag of stolen goods and tried to leave, but he froze in his tracks when he saw the clown doll standing near the front door, barring his way as it giggled.

"No way—you're not real!" the man shouted, dropping the bag.

"I am very—very real—Now you will learn exactly how real I am!" the clown doll replied in a disembodied, child-like voice. The doll lunged towards the man, grabbing his throat. The doll's eyes glowed as it drained the life right out of the last robber. Once his life force abated, the man dropped face down to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Peter and Karen, still bound and gagged, were spellbound to see the clown doll running around, alive like a human. The clown grabbed the thick cords that held Karen and Peter bound and snapped them as if they were strands of thread. Peter removed the tape from his wife's mouth, then his own.

"I saw what you did to those men... What the hell are you?" Peter asked the clown. The clown only stood staring at Peter and Karen for a moment then it bolted up the stairs, darting into Eric's bedroom.

"No you don't—come out of my son's bedroom you little wooden devil!" Peter shouted. He and his wife stormed up the stairs. When they entered their son's bedroom, they were stunned to see the doll holding their son by his feeble legs as the child stood beside his bed, trembling as if in great pain. Through a miraculous touch, the doll drained the sickness right out of Eric's body into its own wooden

body. The doll's eyes grew dim as it dropped to the carpeted floor.

Still sweating from the experience, Eric ran over to his parents as if he'd never had health problems in his life.

"What?—How is this possible? This is unbelievable!" Peter shouted, examining his son from head to toe. "Eric, you're healed."

Peter and Karen were dumbfounded... their minds and hearts were filled with many mixed emotions. Peter approached the silent doll, picking it up from the floor. The doll appeared limp, lifeless, still. Its jolly smile was gone, replaced by the expressionless look of death. Peter placed the doll gently back inside the box, sitting the box upon his son's bed. He sat on the bed trying to make sense of the strange encounter.

"That doll healed our son and saved us," Karen said in a whisper, hugging her son tight.

"No Karen... It wasn't the doll... It was the old doll maker, Felix Klein, who healed our son and saved us," Peter said in a calm voice. He gazed over at the doll, then out of the window at the subsiding storm.

BROTHERS



By Rick Weber

Charles and Aaron grew up on the near east side of Detroit in the Brewster-Douglass Housing Project. Their mother, Edna, raised them alone. Their father walked out on them before Aaron was born. Edna did not hold down a job. She could not due to having Sickle Cell Anemia. The family subsisted on local charity handouts and food stamps. Their home was an apartment in this fallen down housing project, which the city wanted to raze.

Charles, a couple of years older than Aaron, began skipping school before he was in the ninth grade and took to the streets acting as a look out for a local drug dealer. It brought some extra money to help out at home and to

help Charles gain “respect” for himself in the “hood”. Edna knew that Charles was up to something, but she didn’t know what it was. They had no telephone service and the Post “office” had long since stopped delivering mail to this notoriously violent complex. As such, Edna never knew that Charles had quit school even before he was old enough to do so. Edna was too weak from dealing with the events, which are part of Sickle Cell.

Aaron looked up to Charles. Charles impressed him with some of the jewelry and clothes bought with his ill gotten gains. It was no surprise when Aaron was about to go to high school that he followed in Charles’ footsteps. Charles had risen from lookout to drug runner working for Stone, a folk hero to the project’s residents and a villain to the police. It was the 1980’s and crack ruled their world.

Minimum mandatory drug sentences at the time called for a five year drug sentence just for being in possession of a quantity of 50 grams of cocaine or heroin. The State of Michigan prosecuted these cases vigorously, as Charles’ predecessor found out when two narcotics detectives stopped him coming out of the stash house with two ounces of cocaine. A search warrant was obtained for the stash house resulting in the seizure of a kilogram of the drug and the arrests of the two women sitting on the load. These two women felt the hard edge of the mandatory sentence statutes, which called for a mandatory life term in prison for those having more than 650 grams of heroin or cocaine in their possession. Charles was approaching the age of seventeen when these laws would apply to him. Right now, both he and Aaron were juveniles and Stone knew that.

In no time flat after the raid, Stone was back in business with a new stash, new employees to sit on it, a new runner, Charles, and a new lookout, Aaron.

Stone knew Aaron so no introduction or references were needed on his first day on the corner doing what Charles had done for the past couple of years. All Aaron had to do was signal the next lookout at the entrance to the project when he saw a police scout car coming down the street. The work was easy enough and Stone paid good wages.

In Charles’ new position, he made runs to an empty apartment where Stone had his “office” from the stash house which was nearby. With Charles’ new job came additional responsibilities such as not getting stopped by the police and keeping his mouth shut if he did get caught. He received codes on a pager supplied by Stone as to the amount he needed to bring to the “office”. He varied his routes to the “office” on foot and was told to toss the load if he felt that he was going to get caught.

Charles was smart, or so he thought. With the additional combined income they both had, Charles and Aaron were able to provide for their mother. Edna was too weak to question their earnings and knew that they would need a new place to live soon because the city wanted to close their building.

All went well until one day Charles got picked up in a police sweep of the projects. He had just turned seventeen and was bringing a two ounce coke package over to Stone from the stash. Charles was toast and he knew it. Rattling out Stone and the stash’s location were out of the question. Jackson State Prison was his next destination.

Stone took it all in stride. Once again in a short time, he moved his stash and had a new runner in place. The new runner was not Aaron, who was too inexperienced, but Troy, another kid from the hood. Without Charles’ income, Aaron became Edna’s sole support.

Troy and Aaron were friends and they talked about Stone’s crew taking two hits in such a short time from the police. They both agreed that there had to be a rat, someone selling them out to the police but who among the crew was that disloyal to Stone puzzled them. Stone didn’t seem to be all that worried. To him, it was business. You had to take the bad with the good.

One day several weeks after Charles’ arrest, Aaron finished his duties on the corner for the day and stopped in a nearby Coney Island hot dog shop to buy dinner for him and his mother. As his order was being bagged up he saw Stone getting into the back seat of a Lincoln Town Car, which he had never seen in the neighborhood before. Probably a business meeting Aaron thought as he made his way home on a cold January night with lake effect snow coming down on the sidewalk. A few days later, Troy was picked up in another drug sweep, which the police called “Operation Crack Down.” Troy had only a half-ounce of cocaine on him at the time and quickly bonded out of Wayne County Jail.

On the corner a couple of days later, Troy and Aaron talked about this latest bust. Troy was the only one from Stone’s crew to get picked up this time. Some of the other crews didn’t fare as well. Flops, a “colleague” of Stone, lost his stash house with five kilos of coke along with six of his people, a serious hit. Rumor had it that Flops had gone into hiding fearing that he would be next. Troy and Aaron concluded that there had to be more than one snitch to do all of this damage. That night while walking home, Aaron saw Stone getting out of the same white Town Car he had seen him in the week before. This time it was on a dark

side street a few blocks away from the project. Aaron thought to himself that nothing shook up Stone. That is why everyone called him Stone because he was hard and cold. To Aaron, Stone was probably setting up his next load from the people in that car.

Edna and Aaron visited Charles, who was detained at the jail pending the outcome of his case. Aaron told Charles about the recent arrests at the Brewster Project and Charles advised him that he already knew. With Edna out of earshot in the visiting room, Aaron told Charles about his talks with Troy. Charles agreed with their assessment that to take out two crews at the same time the cops had to have more than one snitch. Charles warned Aaron to be careful. Without the money for a private attorney and no option to cooperate with the law, Charles told Aaron and his mother that he was resigned to plead guilty straight up to the charges and take a five year stretch at “Jacktown”. Charles also whispered into Aaron’s ear before the visiting session ended that he would let him know what the jail’s walls had to tell about the recent events in the projects.

As he stood on the corner tending to his duties, Aaron saw the same Town Car, which he had seen Stone getting into and out of on those prior occasions, and wondered why Stone’s new connection risked driving down Wilkens Street in broad daylight. Aaron figured that it had to be important, but Stone would only tell those who needed to know if he told anyone at all. The next day, the cops swooped down again and made some arrests including Aaron. Since he was only sixteen and had no drugs in his possession, the police did not charge him and released him to his mother with a warning that he was hanging with the wrong crowd.

Troy was also picked up by the police and had an ounce of coke on him, which he was bringing to Stone’s “office”. This time Troy knew that he would not be able to bond out of jail and hoped that he would get a cell in the same section as Charles where the East Siders looked out for each other. Also caught in the dragnet was Flops along with another five people from his crew. Flops was now out of the picture and his crew was for all practical purposes, decimated. To Aaron, this appeared to be good news. This meant that Stone would be getting more business from the void left by Flops untimely departure. Flops’ long list of past arrests and convictions also meant he would be held without bail.

Aaron was hoping to become a runner in Stone’s expanding enterprise. To his dismay, Stone kept him as a lookout telling Aaron that he had to make “his bones” first before he would be given any shot at advancement.

Aaron was a bit dejected, but glad that Stone thought he held promise.

It was visiting day again at the jail and Aaron accompanied Edna to see Charles. Aaron was also anxious to hear what the jail's walls had to say from Charles about the recent events in the Brewster Project. Charles told Edna that he was holding up fine under the circumstances, which is what she wanted to hear. Overall, Charles wait time pending court was not too bad. Troy had been assigned to the same cell block with a couple of Flops' runners, Derek and Joe. Flops, on the other hand, was moved a block predominated by West Siders. Not that this was a bad thing for Flops, no one in the cell block bothered him, but it did mean that he couldn't run his business from the inside by getting messages out to the remnants of his crew in the hood. Flops knew that he was done, but by whom, which puzzled him as it did Derek and Joe.

The visit with Charles went well for Edna. When Edna turned to talk to Troy's mother, who was waiting for her son to be brought into the visiting room, Charles whispered into Aaron's ear to be careful. He then gave him the rundown, which he, Troy, Derek, and Joe put together.

Charles advised Aaron that Aaron was picked up first by the cops so he could not alert any of the runners moving about inside the project giving the police time to move in. Charles added that only the lack of dope in his possession and his age kept Aaron out of jail. There were no turf battles at the time between the crews working in the projects. There was enough work for everyone and no one appeared to be greedy. Charles opined that someone on the outside may be looking to move in, but did not know whom. The discussions among Charles, Troy, Derek, and Joe did not yield any potential candidates.

When Aaron heard this, he said that Stone did not seem to be bothered by the arrests of his own people and that Aaron seen him meeting with a new connection who drove a white Town Car. Charles asked Aaron some questions about the Town Car and told Aaron that he had no idea who Stone's new business associate was. Their visit concluded with Charles advising Aaron to be careful and saying goodbye to his mother.

Stone did not bring anyone new in to fill the void left by the latest arrests from his crew. Stone also did not appear to be eager to take over the customers left by Flops' arrest. Stone never gave any reasons for his actions to anyone, even to those in his crew. In turn, no one from his crew ever asked him about his business decisions. To those on the crew, the less you knew, the better off you were.

Work did pick up for Stone's crew despite his apparent lack of interest in Flops' customer base and talent pool. Soon, Aaron was moved up from lookout to runner, making about the same money Charles was earning in that position. This made it easier on Aaron to care for his mother, who had now become too ill to be cognizant of anything he did. Aaron remembered Charles' warning to be careful and he took no chances in his new position. Aaron would vary his routes each time he left the stash house for Stone's "office".

Another night after he finished his rounds for the day, Aaron took a circuitous route home so that he could pick up on anyone tailing him. As he crossed St. Antoine Street, he saw Stone down the block standing bent over beside that same Town Car talking to the driver who was out of view. Stone had his back to Aaron, who really didn't pay Stone or the car very much mind. Aaron had to get home to tend to his mother.

When he entered their apartment, Aaron found Edna, unconscious and unresponsive. He found a neighbor home that had telephone service and asked that neighbor to call for EMS. A brief time later the paramedics arrived and transported Edna, accompanied by Aaron, to Detroit Receiving Hospital. On the way to the hospital from inside the ambulance, Aaron saw Stone still talking to the driver of the Town Car. At the hospital, Edna was immediately taken into the Emergency Room treatment area where doctors and nurses gathered around her to assess her condition by first asking Aaron questions about her. Aaron was able to tell the hospital staff that his mother suffered from pulmonary hypertension as a result of Sickle Cell. It would be a long night for Aaron, who would have to be at the hospital alone tending to his mother because they had no other family members in town.

Edna's condition was critical. She had pneumonia and the prognosis was not good due to her weakened condition. The doctors were candid with Aaron and didn't hold out much hope for Edna to recover. This left Aaron wondering what to do next when his pager went off. He saw the code from Stone wanting to know where he was. From the nurses' station, Aaron was able to call Stone's cellular phone, a device which few people had at that time. After telling Stone about his mother's condition, Stone told Aaron that everything was cool and to take care of his mother. Stone also told Aaron if he needed anything to give him a call, which gave Aaron some sense of relief. The next thing on his mind was how to let Charles know that their mother was in the hospital. Aaron left a message at the Public Defender's office for Charles' attorney to contact him at the

hospital. Suffice to say, Aaron's mind was not tied up with work matters.

Aaron spent the day watching his mother who had become comatose and was slipping away. This made him sad. Edna had been moved to a hospital room and Aaron was with her. Charles' attorney returned Aaron's call and offered to contact the jail to notify Charles about their mother's condition. Aaron was relieved to hear that, but who else did he have to call. Edna's brother James lived in Alabama and was the only other living relative Aaron knew about. Aaron had not seen his Uncle James since he was eight years old and had no telephone number nor address for him.

As he pondered this over, he looked up at the television in his mother's room which had the local news on. The lead story was about another drug sweep in the Brewster Douglass Housing Project. Aaron watched as a couple of his co-workers on Stone's crew and the rest of those left from Flops' group were being "perp walked" in front of the news cameras to waiting scout cars. Another hit, Aaron thought and now, what would come up next. As he watched the TV cameras panning the scene, he saw the white Lincoln Town Car belonging to Stone's contact parked near the entrance to the complex. It didn't appear to be occupied. Aaron then began to think if both Stone and his associate had both been picked up this time, but he could not dwell on it. Edna's breathing became hard and labored. Aaron called for the nurses because he knew the end was near. A couple of hours later, a doctor pronounced Edna dead. Not knowing what to do, Aaron called Stone and hoped that he was not in jail.

Stone answered on the first ring and assured Aaron that everything was fine although a couple more people from his crew did get arrested on some minor charges. After hearing about Edna's death, Stone offered to pay for her funeral. Not that Stone had a soft spot in his heart; he knew the value of good public relations to keep up his image. Stone also knew that such "good deeds" would give him an extra layer of protection in the neighborhood to keep the police away from his "office" door.

Charles' attorney was able to have him notified, not only about Edna's hospitalization, but also about her passing. Being incarcerated meant that Charles could not attend his mother's wake. Stone kept his word and paid for a simple but dignified funeral for Edna. Through social workers at the hospital, her brother James was advised of her death and he made it to Detroit for her funeral. James was glad to see Aaron after such a long time and offered him a place to live. James was a steel worker in Birmingham, where he lived with his wife and daughter. His offer to Aaron meant a

simple, but secure existence, which Aaron accepted.

Shortly after the funeral, Aaron and his Uncle James packed up the mementos from the apartment, which Edna had shared with her sons. While James was depositing some unwanted items from the apartment at a local church charity, Aaron stopped by the "office" and turned his pager over to Stone. Aaron thanked Stone, who uncharacteristically smiled and said, "Anytime." Without much more conversation, Aaron bid his goodbyes to Stone and what was left of the crew. He then headed back to the apartment to pack up his scant belongings. When his Uncle James returned, they put them in James' car and stopped by the jail to visit Charles on their way out of town to Alabama.

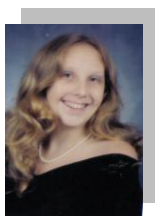
As the car passed into Ohio from Michigan and entered the city of Toledo, Aaron looked off to see the sun setting in the west and he felt strangely at peace with himself.

At the same time in Detroit, as Stone was walking to his car parked on Brush Street, the white Lincoln Town Car pulled up to the curb next to him. Two men got out of the Lincoln and one of them said, "Stone, we have to have a little talk." This time, Stone became nervous and quickly turned around as if he wanted to run but he found the second man standing in his path. It was a bitter cold day and no one was on the street to see what was happening. The second man checked Stone to see if he was carrying a gun but only found his off-white colored brick of a cellular phone in his coat pocket, which he threw onto the front seat of the Lincoln. The first man opened the rear door of the Lincoln and told Stone to get in. With a quick shove from the first man, Stone complied while the second man made his way towards the opposite rear door.

The first man got behind the wheel and moved the car down Brush Street. "Where are we going?" screamed Stone. "Our place," the driver answered. With that the second man ordered Stone to lean forward and put his hands behind his back. Stone complied and he felt his wrists being restrained. "What's this all about?" Stone demanded. "You didn't think we were going to let you double dip. Did you, Stone?" the driver asked rhetorically. "You wanted us to put Flops out of business," the second one said and added, "Well, he's done but, you couldn't dream for a minute that we were going to let you take over for him even though you threw a few of your own people under the bus."

"If you did, you were wrong," the driver chimed in. Then the driver added, "And now, you're done, too," as the car pulled in front of 1300 Beaubien Street... Detroit Police Headquarters.

THE SWITCH



By Jamie White

"You know what we should do?"

Abby must've heard those words come out of her twins' mouth a million times in their nineteen years and they never stopped being terrifying. Claudia was always restless and looking for something new, exciting and adventurous. More often than not, those words had gotten them into some kind of fix, but that never stopped her from asking what it was and eventually going along with it. What was that old saying? Insanity was performing the same action over and over while expecting a different result. If that was true, then Abby was certifiable. Ok, she had to admit that her twin had never gotten her into any real trouble; only a few really scary and awkward situations. This was mostly because she was far too timid, a point of contention between the two. Claudia was always telling Abby to lighten up and have some fun.

Truth be told, Abby was jealous of her sister. Claudia wasn't plagued by insecurities and was always first to sign up for some new challenge. Her life seemed like so much fun. She tried to imagine what it was like for her twin to live with no fears, no insecurities holding her back. She suddenly realized her twin was waiting for a response, bringing her back to reality. "What?"

"Well, you know I have that trip coming up, right?"

Was she kidding? It was all that Claudia had been talking about. In a few short weeks, Claudia would be embarking on a safari where she'd be camping and hiking, not to mention all the amazing creatures her group would be seeing. Abby had considered going as well after Claudia raved about the last trip. She had to admit that the pictures and stories her twin had brought home were tempting. Still, she hesitated and before she knew it, all the slots were filled. She'd been kicking herself over it for days. "Yeah?"

"Well, I was just thinking that it's a shame you missed out on a seat so... how'd you like to take my place?"

"Are you serious?" *What was I thinking? Of course she's serious!* Her twin had instigated more switches than Abby could count over the years and each one had been a success. They knew each other well enough to fool even their own families when they wanted to. They rarely did it to their parents though, and never revealed any of their switches so no one even considered the idea they would try it.

"Sure, why not? Look, I've already gone on one of these and I know you're dying to check this out. You take my place. No one will ever guess. They haven't had a meeting for the trip yet and most of the people going don't know me. Plus, you know how well I can fool them here."

"Well..." Abby was tempted. Boy, was she tempted. She would love to be able to see all those creatures in the wild and study them. She'd always had a fascination with animals and even considered being a vet at one point before settling on education.

"Come on... you know you want to." Claudia's voice took on a teasing tone, her one eyebrow arched in a silent challenge.

"Alright, I'm in." Claudia always managed to get her way on things, it was a gift. Her parents always teased her that she should become a lawyer or politician. There were few things she couldn't talk someone into.

Several weeks later Abby was getting ready to board a plane. She'd said goodbye to her family outside her parent's home before the shuttle arrived to drive the group to the airport only a short time ago and she already missed them. She never traveled so far before with people she barely knew. She was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea as a sudden rush of butterflies invaded her stomach. *Well, there's no backing out now...*

A few days into her trip and Abby was having the time of her life. The isolation was unexpectedly freeing to her. She didn't have to worry about constant phone calls and people coming by to ask for help with one problem or another. She could just relax and enjoy the sights that surrounded her. Claudia had been right; she did need this trip. Abby hadn't realized how stressed she'd been until she arrived here. When she got back she was going to have to thank Claudia for talking her into going.

Back home, Claudia was having a different experience. She had left her cell phone at home and moved into Abby's room for the duration of the trip. She didn't know how her twin handled things as well as she did. Since she was known as the more sensible of the two (and

because Abby had an extreme allergy to the word “no”), friends always turned to her when they were having a problem. Claudia was already feeling the burn out. This was why she didn’t often volunteer for stuff or offer advice to people; they would just keep coming back for more. She’d have to have a talk with Abby when she got back about being too much of a doormat. It wasn’t good for her. For now, Claudia was about to go out and have some fun with the few friends of Abby’s who didn’t constantly need help with one crisis or another. They were going out to a movie and then to get something to eat. It sounded boring, but should be an interesting change of pace for Claudia. She usually spent her nights at campus parties or any club that would allow people under twenty-one. She’d just finished putting on one of her sister’s favorite shirts when the doorbell rang. “Coming!” She grabbed her sister’s purse and hurried for the door. It wouldn’t be good to be late since Abby was punctual to a fault. She opened the door, putting on the same bright smile her sister always used to greet people. “Hi, Kristy!”

“Hi!” Kristy gestured to the hallway. “All ready to go?”

“Of course! Where’s everyone else?” She peeked into the hallway, looking for the two girls who were joining them.

“They’re waiting downstairs in the car. We couldn’t find a parking space.”

“Oh, ok. Tell them I’m on my way down, just have to lock up.”

“No problem.” Kristy turned around and hurried downstairs as Claudia quickly scanned the apartment and locked the door. Her sister would kill her if she forgot to turn the water off or lock the door. She’d already done each a couple times and nearly caused a little flood in her own home.

“Hi, everyone!” Claudia climbed into the back seat with a girl named Dana, who had worked in the school bookstore with her sister. In the driver’s seat was Leslie, a girl Abby had met in a literature class the year before. “How are you guys?”

“We’re good,” Leslie answered. “So what are we going to see?”

How Abby, who loved order so much, managed to be friends with them she had no idea. The one time she’d gone to the movies with them, they spent about twenty minutes debating what they were going to see that night and barely ended up having time to get to their seats before the show started. “How about that comedy that just opened?” Claudia remembered that Abby had been the one to

suggest a movie first. After a bunch of debate, they’d finally gone with her choice. The same held true that night. By the time they’d gotten to the theatre and Claudia bought her sister’s favorite snack (a diet soda and some raisinettes) they barely had time to sit down before the credits started to play. The smell of the popcorn her friends had bought was driving her crazy. Movie theater butter was her favorite, Abby couldn’t stand the stuff. Claudia licked her lips and tried to block the smell from her mind, popping one of the candies in her mouth.

Later that night, George Phillips was awakened by the sound of the phone ringing. He blindly reached for the receiver, blinking his eyes to clear the haze he was looking through. “Hello?” Mr. Phillips listened to the person on the phone a minute, the color draining from his face. “Yes, we’ll be right there.”

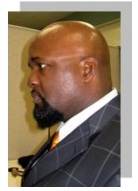
“What’s going on?” His wife Susan sat up as a yawn escaped her lips.

“It’s Abby. There’s been an accident.”

Twenty minutes later, George held his sobbing wife as the doctor broke the news. The car Abby had been riding in hit a tree after her friend Leslie swerved to avoid a deer that ran into the road on their way home from the movies. Abby had been sitting in front and was thrown from the vehicle. The two sat in silence for what seemed like forever, holding onto each other as though holding on to a life preserver. Finally, Mrs. Phillips broke the silence.

“Claudia won’t be back for another couple of days. What are we going to say to her?” She couldn’t imagine the pain her daughter was going to feel coming home to such horrible news. The two had always been so close. Just before Claudia left for the trip, Abby had been saying how excited she was to hear all about her sister’s adventure. They couldn’t call to give her a warning before she got back. Even if they could, would they? How could they break such news over the phone? No, there was no way they could do that. They’d just have to make sure that they were there to greet her and give her the news in person.

CRIMSON



By Etheridge G. Lovett

The alluring smell of freshly baked bread and other delectable foods, wafted through the warm air of Perugia, Italy, as residents and visitors, strolled along the well-kept cobblestone walkways of the attractive hilltop city. Many of the visitors and residents stopped by several shops and street vendors along the way, seeking cigars, meats, wines, or other goods they so desired.

Purple herons and Mediterranean gulls sailed upward from the nearby Tiber River, drifting peacefully across the clear blue skies while chirping out their pleasant song. It was the month of September, bringing temperatures well into the eighties, but very few cared, for the town of Perugia was alive with its colorful signs, children laughing and playing, vibrant colored buildings, and people from various walks of life.

At the highest peak of the popular college town, home of the *University of Perugia*; one could enjoy the breathtaking view of the surrounding purple-shaded hills, speckled with homes and other buildings. Like one of Perugia’s famous artist of the past, Pietro Vannucci (*Perugino*); a handsome middle-aged artist of its present day, Alessandro Russo, was making his rising mark upon the art world.

“Alessandro, smile... you should be very proud of yourself now. You’ll soon be a famous artist of Perugia... Ten of your best art pieces are now hanging in the famous Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri Museum. I’ve received several calls from interested buyers concerning your artwork in such a short period of time,” said Marietta De Luca, head museum curator. She was a very attractive woman with a voluptuous figure like that of a Greek goddess; with light green eyes and black flowing long hair that reached the lower part of her back.

“Marietta, I’m most gracious to you for inviting me here to place my artwork on the walls of this prestigious art museum... Thank you so much for your kindness,” Alessandro said, smiling as he took a sip from a glass of grachetto wine given to him by Marietta to celebrate his

first public art display. Alessandro was a tall handsome man; but humble and shy. He was a man who was devoted to his marriage and faith, regardless of the outside temptation he'd often encounter from some of the women of Perugia who were smitten by his looks. However, Marietta had sought to change his mind and faith by softening him up with a taste of her finest wine.

Hearing Alessandro's response to her earlier statement, Marietta smiled. She walked over and closed the door to her office, then locked it behind her. She stared upon Alessandro with a wanting gaze, then approached him, saying, "Did you honestly think that I'd go through all of this trouble of having your artwork displayed here just to have you sit there and tell me thanks? No, Alessandro Russo... I want much more than that... I want all of you... I have wanted you since the first day you strolled into my office seeking a place to display your fine works of art."

Stunned and angered, Alessandro placed his glass of wine upon Marietta's desk as he stood, replying, "What are you saying to me? I'm a happily married man of fifteen years... I have never cheated on my wife, and I don't plan to start now just to have my artwork on display here." Before Alessandro could turn to leave the office, Marietta raced towards him, grabbing him. Her sweet-smelling, intoxicating perfume rose up from her curvaceous body, arousing Alessandro's senses with each breath he took.

"Stop running from love, Alessandro Russo, or you'll become an old, boring man, full of dullness, loneliness and regret... Only true love can give you life," Marietta said, laughing aloud. She pulled Alessandro closer, kissing the confused artist on the cheek, but he pushed her away.

"Marietta De Luca, you're not a woman of love, but of lust... I'm not that kind of a man... I'm a man of spiritual and moral conviction and principles," Alessandro proclaimed.

"Save your sermon on the mountain for someone else... all married men say the same thing at first. No matter what you say, I will eventually have all of you," Marietta said, laughing at the visibly upset artist.

"Marietta, from this day onward, our art dealings are over... I'll stop by tomorrow morning with my wife and pick up my artwork," Alessandro said, wiping Marietta's bright red lipstick from his face with his forearm. He unlocked the door to the office and left Marietta sitting upon her desk, laughing aloud. She laughed because little did Alessandro know; Marietta slipped a love letter inside his pant pocket without the slightest detection, in hopes

that his wife would eventually find it. This has always been her practice in the past to ruin married men that she wanted, but couldn't have.



The very next morning, Alessandro was awakened by a loud, nerve-rattling shout, "Alessandro Russo!" He hopped up out of bed, running into the living room. It is there, he saw his wife, Floriana Russo, standing with his pants and the love letter in her grasp, her eyes reddened from crying. "What the hell is this love letter from some Marietta whore doing in your pant pocket, Alessandro? She mentioned in her letter she had an affair with you!"

In that split second he realized what Marietta had done. "Listen to me, Floriana, please calm down... I can explain everything," Alessandro pleaded.

"Explain? How can you possibly explain your way out of this situation? You are a no good filthy man, that's the explanation... You want to lay up with me and every woman in Perugia!" Floriana blasted.

"No—that's not true... I'm in love with you only, Floriana... you're my world... no other woman can ever take your place," Alessandro said.

"I hate you, Alessandro Russo!" Floriana shouted, crinkling up the letter, tossing it to the floor. She stormed into their bedroom and slammed the door shut. Alessandro tried to speak to his wife further, but she continued to shout through the door, "Go away you cheating, filthy animal!"

"Please listen to me—you must believe me—I'm innocent!" Alessandro shouted, heading towards the living room. He sat in a chair staring at the crumpled note on the floor. Alessandro buried his face in his trembling hands and wept. He knew that his wife would never trust him ever again. He also knew that the peace within his own home has been shattered... forever.

Hours later, Alessandro tried to work on several art pieces he'd started earlier, but couldn't. Whenever he began painting, he'd end up smearing it with paint. Alessandro's creative mind was severely blocked. The only thing he could think of was to walk the lively streets of Perugia to gain a peace of mind. Long walks through the streets of the Italian town became

his only pathway to solace. When he returned from his walk, Floriana was there to greet him, to badger him further concerning the love letter. No matter what he tried to explain, his words fell upon deaf ears.

"I can't paint a single thing because of this argumentative madness... Why are you doing this to me after all these years of marriage? Because of your bickering and non-trust, my life now rests within a heated crucible!" Alessandro shouted, clutching a handful of his black, curly hair. His nerves stood on end with each shout or yell exploding from Floriana's throat.

"To hell with your art career... I don't care if you never paint another thing—I don't care, you filthy liar and cheater!" Floriana shouted.

Alessandro stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him so hard that the house shook. He returned to the peaceful comforts of Perugia's streets. He walked for hours until something clicked in his mind. Just as the darkness of midnight took hold of the town, so did mental madness take over the mind of the artist. Alessandro thought, *'My home... that's my home, handed down to me by my parents. I'm allowing some foul mouth, unbelieving wife to run me away from my own inherited home.'* This was Alessandro's epiphany moment. He gazed at his trembling hands, the hands that earned him his stability in life. The artist turned, standing on the highest hill of Perugia, staring at his family's home on another lesser hill in the distance. He shoved his hands in his pant pocket then stormed back down the streets towards his home. Several street dogs barked aloud when they caught a glimpse of the angry artist. Staring at the dogs, Alessandro released a loud snarl, causing the dogs to tuck their tails between their legs and scurry away. He continued on his way towards his home on the hill.

When Alessandro made it to the front door of his home, he peered through the thin-laced decorative curtains at his wife sitting in the living room. She waited on him to return like a probation officer would a parolee neglecting his curfew. She'd plan to continue her verbal assault upon the reserved artist concerning the letter she found and held tight in her grasp. What she didn't know was that the reserved, shy and timid artist she once knew and loved; had mentally transformed into a cold, calculative monster. Alessandro Russo continued his uncontrollable decent into the dark valley that he feared the most, the valley of mental madness. He unlocked; then opened the door. He stepped inside, closing the door and locking it behind him. He pulled down the door's blinds.

"Alessandro, look at the time on the grandfather's clock... Why are you so late coming home? Who's the whore you're laying up with now? Is it that Marietta whore you're seeing at the art museum? Or maybe it's the whore at the downtown butcher's shop?" Floriana shouted; her eyes dilated and her veins in her neck bulging with each verbal utterance.

"Stop shouting at me —stop—stop—stop!" Alessandro shouted. Complete madness and anger took over and before he knew it, he lunged towards his wife, choking her in a sudden uncontrollable fit of rage. His bulging eyes reddened as sweat beaded over the veins protruding from his forehead.

When his wife ceased all movement, Alessandro's tight clasp around her throat loosened. Silence, once again, filled the Russo's quaint home. Only a distinct ticking sound coming from the large antique grandfather clock he'd purchased from Germany was heard. When calmness returned to Alessandro, his wife, Floriana Russo, was no more.

Alessandro sat in his favorite chair directly across from his dead wife, staring, unable to accept the fact that he'd just murdered his wife in cold blood. He dropped his head in his hands, weeping over her death. After weeping for an hour or so, it dawned on Alessandro that his problems have just increased sevenfold. He suddenly realized he had a body to dispose of and a murder to conceal.

"My God—what have I done to my Floriana?" Alessandro questioned, running his trembling hands through his hair. Then he thought with a madman's mind, "The body—if I drain the body of its blood, I could easily dispose of it without making a mess. Blood is what the detectives will certainly look for."

Alessandro sprung from his chair and ran to close the blinds to all of the windows. He also dimmed the lights of his modest abode. He dragged his wife's body down a flight of steps into the basement where he once played innocent games as a child. Alessandro looked around the room until his eyes landed upon a rope, a bucket and a sharp blade, hanging upon a nearby wall. He grabbed the rope and tossed it over a large beam in the ceiling. Alessandro tied the opposite end of the rope around his wife's ankles as her body rested upon the cold cement floor. With several great heaves, Alessandro hoisted his wife's body up four feet off the ground. He tied the opposite end of the rope around a side beam. He pushed the bucket underneath his wife's head. He gazed upon her, whispering, "Blaise Pascal was right... *The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.*"

Alessandro grabbed the sharp blade and swiped it across the throat of Floriana. The blood flowed freely into the bucket. He left the corpse strung up overnight.

The next morning, Alessandro raced downstairs to learn that his wife's body was as stiff as a board and the bucket was filled with her blood. He slid the bucket out of the way; then untied the rope. The body dropped to the ground with a hideous thud.

"Pardon my clumsiness, Floriana... Good morning, my love," Alessandro whispered to the corpse. He struggled to drag Floriana's body up the stairs towards the back door of his home. "I'll bury you in the backyard rose garden, my love, so you'll always be close to me," Alessandro said, smiling. He opened the back door, peeking outside to make sure no one was watching. He grabbed a shovel and began digging in the center of the rose garden. Once he dug a large enough hole, he scurried back inside the home and drag Floriana's body out towards the hole he dug.

"Sleep in peace, my love, until the trumpets of angels summons you," Alessandro said, dropping to his knees before Floriana's body. He rolled her body over into the hole he dug. He plucked several red roses from a nearby bush and tossed them inside the shrewd grave. Alessandro stood, covering up the body of his wife. He tossed several leaves and other surrounding material over the fresh grave, making it almost invisible to the naked eye.

"Silly old me, I almost forgot —the blood... How could I forget the blood," Alessandro whispered. He dropped the shovel and ran back inside the home, locking the door behind him. He went down into the basement and sat down in a chair across from the bucket of blood, staring at it as if waiting on it to speak to him. Then he thought through his madman's mind, "Paint... I'll make the finest crimson paint ever... I'll paint everything in crimson from this day forward in honor of my sweet Floriana."

Alessandro spent all day taking the blood, mixing it with raw linseed oil and crimson pigment to produce the most striking crimson color ever seen. The *muller* grinded against the homemade paint for hours until a smooth, perfect batch of crimson paint emerged. Pleased with his work, Alessandro sat up several easels with canvas and an old record player in the living room. He put on a record of the classical symphonic works of Beethoven then he spread out his well-used paint brushes upon a nearby table. He placed the crimson paint before him and began creating his master works of art. Alessandro's spirit was finally free and at peace. He painted without mental restraints; amazing landscape scenes, life-like animals, still life displays—everything he could think of. Over the

span of two days, Alessandro painted well over fifteen large paintings. When he signed his final painting, he sat, smiling in his living room, staring over his superb artwork. However, his smile faded fast when it dawned on him that he had ran out of crimson paint.

The phone in Alessandro's living room rang aloud, jarring him from his thoughts. He raced across the room, half stumbling over his own two feet. He grabbed the phone, answering, "Alessandro Russo here."

"I finally reached you... Alessandro, where on earth have you been? I thought you were coming over to remove your artwork from my museum?" Marietta De Luca inquired in a slightly hostile tone.

"Marietta, calm down just for one moment... I have been going through quite a lot lately... I had a big argument with my wife and she decided to leave me for good. She's gone to live with her mother, leaving me here all alone," Alessandro explained, hoping that Marietta would believe his story.

Thinking on Alessandro's words, Marietta's voice softened as she replied, "Alessandro, how many times must I come to your rescue? I'll tell you what I'll do for you; I'll keep your artwork hanging in the museum and have a special showing of your artwork before some of the wealthiest citizens of Perugia. How does that sound?" Marietta hoped that her words would grant her the sexual opportunity she desired days earlier.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea... I've already created several new art pieces I'd love for you to see, if you don't mind stopping by my home to see them," Alessandro said.

"Are you sure your wife wouldn't mind my visiting your home without her being there?" Marietta said.

"No—my wife doesn't mind. She's behind my art career; mind, body and soul," Alessandro said, glancing down at the blood-stained empty bucket.

"I have a few business matters to address, but I'll be there as soon as they're resolved," Marietta said in an excited voice.

"I'll be anxiously waiting, Marietta," Alessandro said, ending the call.

When Marietta hung up the phone, she thought that perhaps the argument Alessandro had with his wife somehow opened up an opportunity for her to add another name to her long list of married men lovers. She felt that married men were good for giving her extravagant gifts and money from time to time

in exchange for her sexual favors, but they were never to be trusted or taken seriously. In this position, she felt like the queen of Perugia. Marietta leaned back in her office chair, smiling at the thought.

An hour later, Marietta had arrived at the Russo's home. She approached the front door, gently knocking several times. She could hear the pleasant sound of classical music playing in the home. The deadbolt lock clicked, and the front door whined as it opened wide. Alessandro stepped to the door dressed in his finest suit. The smell of Alessandro's cologne and Marietta's sweet-smelling perfume intermingled.

"Alessandro Russo... I'm impressed... I've never seen you dressed so handsomely before... And the red roses... are they for me?" Marietta asked with a stunned look on her face.

"The roses are for the one and only true supporter of my art talents," Alessandro said, handing the roses to Marietta. He then bowed so low before her that she was able to see the neat part running across the top of his curly hair.

"Alessandro, I'm deeply honored... you even groomed yourself so nicely, just to impress me," Marietta said. "Now that you've given me the roses, are you going to invite me in?"

"Silly little me... of course, come in," Alessandro offered, stepping aside.

The moment Marietta entered the home her eyes fell upon Alessandro's latest crimson art collection, lined up neatly around the living room.

"Unbelievable—you're an absolute genius!" Marietta praised, approaching the artwork. "I see millions of dollars in here... We're having a Millionaire's Art Extravaganza Art Show tomorrow and I want you to be there with these fabulous works of art. Here is one of the tickets, which will allow you automatic access to the show," Marietta said. She reached into her purse, pulling out the ticket, handing it to Alessandro. "Come to the show tomorrow, you'll be an instant star, Alessandro."

Blushing, with his hands clasped behind his back, Alessandro replied, "Why—thank you for your positive critique of my latest artwork. I call it, CRIMSON."

Putting on her eye glasses to see the artwork more thoroughly, Marietta studied several of the paintings up close as she asked, "Why on earth would you name these incredible art pieces, CRIMSON, when there are so many other interesting names to label it?"

Alessandro's smile faded as he replied, "I call it crimson because crimson was the color of my beloved wife's blood once I slit her throat." Alessandro produced the bloodstained blade he used on Floriana.

Marietta stood petrified as her face displayed the perfect image of sheer horror. Alessandro dropped the blade and lunged upon Marietta like an untamed beast, snapping her neck as if it was a mere twig. Marietta's fate quickly followed that of Floriana's in order to supply the artistic cravings of the mad master artist. In several hours, Alessandro had produced the paint he needed to continue his work.

From the time he attained the new paint, until three in the morning; Alessandro was busy painting. He added ten more paintings to his cache of crimson oil paintings. Impressed with his work, Alessandro took a cold shower and dressed in another of his finest suits. He loaded his artwork in his vehicle and drove to the art museum just in time for the famed Millionaire's Art Extravaganza Art Show. The curator, filling in for Marietta, saw the ticket that Alessandro produced, allowing the artist access to the show. When his Crimson work was placed on display, many people thronged Alessandro, fascinated by his new artwork. Alessandro's striking; one color artwork stood out in the crowd of colorful art pieces. Million dollar sales poured in, making Alessandro Russo an instant multimillionaire. With his new wealth and fame, Alessandro thoroughly cleaned up his inherited home, watered his cherished rose garden, locked up his home, and vanished into obscurity.



HONEST CHEATING



By Narda Mc Carthy

The street was crowded with people of all ages, shapes and colors; they were walking and looking around, as if looking for someone in particular. Some carried plastic cups filled with beer... others, bottles of wine.

Waitresses wearing tight miniskirts were moving rapidly between the restaurants nestled along the street. Each table was crowded with animated diners. Sitting at one table were two men and a woman.

"Yes sir! I cheats cause I be stressed," said the younger of the men, "I live here alone and I be no batty man; the work, mi boss give me plenty stress." The couple in front smiled weakly. He continued:

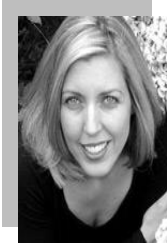
"Mi girlfriend here, she knows I have a half wife back home, the mother of my child; she don't care! Women on this island don't care, there be eight women to a man here and these poor little creatures don't care if the man be below them; they want their man. A woman, she don't want get married, she want her rum and her man; she like it that way."

Two young women passed by making a big fuss over him, were briefly introduced to the couple but were not invited to stay; they said goodbye and kept walking, searching.

"Me," said the young man, "I be building my house back home, mi fadda and mi madda are seeing it, every month I send money and they build a little more. We don't borrow money; we do it little by little. When I finish, then I have a very nice big wedden, I'll marry my woman and won't cheat no more."

"Yes siree! I could give you a plenty excuses why I cheat on my wife! But that would not be honest. I cheat cause women... they be beautiful!"

**POEMS IN HONOR OF
WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH**



“OF A FORGETFUL SEA”

BY KELLI RUSSELL AGODON



Sometimes, I forget the sun
sinking into ocean.

Desert is only a handful of sand
held by my daughter.

In her palm,
she holds small creatures,
tracks an ant, a flea
moving over each grain.

She brings them to places
she thinks are safe:

an island of driftwood,
the knot of a blackberry bush,
a continent of grass.

Fire ants carried on sticks,
potato bugs scooped
into the crease of a newspaper.

She tries to help them
before the patterns of tides
reach their lives.

She knows about families
who fold together like hands,
a horizon of tanks moving forward.

Here war is only newsprint.

How easy it is not to think about it
as we sleep beneath our quiet sky,
slip ourselves into foam, neglectful
waves appearing endless.



**“PHENOMENAL
WOMAN”**

BY MAYA ANGELOU



Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's
size

But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.

I say,
It's in the reach of my arms
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.

I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.

I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.

I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them
They say they still can't see.

I say,
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman

Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.

I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need of my care,
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.



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