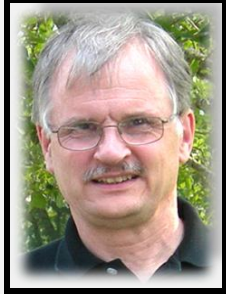


The Portal



The Eagle
By Rick Weber

Phillip watched Gertrude move around the tables as efficiently as a crowded lunchtime pub would allow while serving each customer with a smile. One patron made an announcement which Phillip did not hear at first. Asking Gertrude when she came back to the bar, she reiterated, "He said, 'We found the secret of life.'"

"Not as rough as what a Lancaster crew would belt out in here after a mission," he told her. They both laughed as Phillip finished filling the champagne flutes for some other patrons, who were there for a special occasion. Gertrude took the bubbly out to the guests, and Phillip forgot about the minor interruption.

Gertrude took her job at The Eagle during the war to help out her family at home. It was here she met her husband, Phillip, a wireless operator on a Royal Air Force Lancaster bomber. Since the war ended, Phillip occupied the space behind the bar at The Eagle. He only had to look above him at the pub's ceiling to be reminded of his tenure with the RAF. It was marked with graffiti left by his mates, along with some from US Eighth Air Force counterparts, but the times had changed.

The war had been over for more than seven years. Phillip did not miss it and seldom reminisced. He married Gertrude right after the German surrender and took up his current

position as bar steward while the Americans were headed home.

The crowd nowadays was almost all academics from the nearby Cavendish Laboratory who claimed they were working on some scientific project which promised a major breakthrough. Having no formal education beyond high school, Phillip thought their assertions were great. He preferred this crowd more than his old friends because they were less rowdy. *At least, they don't mark up the ceiling like my old gang used to.*

Later at home, Phillip asked Gertrude, "What did that man mean today when he said, 'We found the secret of life'?"

"I don't know what most of those men from the lab say when they're in. The chap who made the announcement today, I think is a physicist originally from Northampton, and the young man who was with him is a zoologist, a Yank. They're both very nice."

"I have no reason to doubt that," Phillip retorted. "I was just wondering what would cause him to make such a grandiose statement."

"I don't know," she said before turning out the light and going to sleep.

The next afternoon in the pub Phillip saw one of his regulars, a researcher from the lab they called Jangle, who had been in the day before. Phillip asked him, "How big was the news that fellow let out here yesterday?"

"It could be big," Jangle told Phillip. "Then again, it may not be. People have been working on DNA for almost a hundred years. We just have to wait and see. That's science."

Phillip shrugged not knowing what DNA was and set down a glass of ale in front of him.

"There could be more to the story," Jangle added when he was almost through with his first pint. "I heard they were shown some research work product, a photograph a woman in London had without her permission. I don't know where it's all headed. Now, how about pouring me another round?"

Phillip did not know what to say as he took Jangle's glass to be refilled.

The pub became busy as the university's rugby team piled in after practice, and he had to serve them ending their chat.

At home that night, he mentioned his conversation to Gertrude. "You know that gent from the lab who said they found the secret of life. Jangle came in today and said those young men may have seen other research without permission."

"I don't believe that. They seem to be such good people."

"I don't think they were intentionally looking into someone else's work. Jangle told me that they were shown something called 'photograph 51' or so I think. He said the picture belongs to some woman in London who's working on the same subject."

"If Jangle spent more time in the lab and less gossiping in the pub, he would probably get more work of his own done. He can't be getting much accomplished with all the time he's at The Eagle."

Both laughed and went to bed.

Over the next few weeks, Jangle would come in at his usual time, and Phillip would get the latest gossip from inside the lab. As he spouted off his tidbits, Phillip would ask, "What about the secret of life?"

One day Jangle informed him when asked, "Oh, that, it looks like they're talking to the lady about her 'photograph 51'. There may be some headway, even talk about some articles being published. The lads are trying to get her and her collaborator to mend their own fences. I don't know either of them so I can't say much more. I know that our director here in Cambridge is talking to their director in London."

Phillip mentioned this update in passing to Gertrude, who could only smile in acknowledgement, as she picked up a round of drinks for waiting customers. Later, he advised her that "her boys" were also in direct competition with an American who was on the road to the same discovery. A look of concern darted across her face but was quickly erased when he told her, "The Yank can't come across the

pond to look at their work. He seemed to have trouble getting a passport.”

Jangle finally came in one day and told him, “They’re getting an article published in ‘Nature’ set to come out in April.”

“That’s great!” shouted Phillip as he went about his work around the bar.

True to his word, one day in early May, Jangle came in with the scientific journal, ‘Nature’, under his arm. “Look!” he shouted to Phillip as he opened the volume to page 737 and Phillip saw a one-page article, titled: “Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids.” Phillip was lost. He admitted that it was way over his head even after Jangle gave him an explanation.

“So, this is the secret of life,” Phillip remarked as he went on to wait other customers.

Years later, Jangle dropped by and told him, “It looks like the lads have made it big from that article in ‘Nature’. They’re getting the Nobel Prize for medicine.”

Phillip looked at the man in total astonishment. “All that from a one-page article. I don’t believe it. Wait till I tell Gertrude!”



By DiVitto Kelly / Part II

The flight back to Miami Beach was non-eventful, but Myrna was concerned for her husband. Sol slept most of the trip, waking up only to use the bathroom, which he complained was the size of a phone booth, and to eat bland, rubbery chicken breast with shriveled up baked potato. A week later at home, he was still sleeping more than he was awake.

“It’s a gorgeous day, let’s spend some time by the pool,” said his wife,

opening the blinds to their thirteenth floor condo overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Sol grunted. “No thanks.” His modus operandi now consisted of lounging in his New York Met blue Lazy-Boy recliner.

“We’ve been back a week you don’t even go outside any more. For God’s sake, you’re whiter than an egg, and shaped like one too!” said Myrna, exasperated. “Get moving!”

“You’re getting on my nerves and staying there,” Sol replied. “Besides, it’s too hot out; I don’t want to burn my tender skin.” Sol rubbed his toneless limbs, white as bowling pins.

“Tender my ass,” she replied.

“Then how about dinner tonight at Rascal House? There’s no way I’m ordering bad Chinese food again and being cooped up here for another night!”

“Alright, alright!” he answered. “Just let me be!” Sol knew that something was wrong. Whatever Myrna’s mother saw in his eyes had unnerved him, still. The sun now irritated the retired deli owner just as much as his wife, which was quite a feat.

It was seven in the evening, slightly cool for early March. The line for the restaurant stretched outside the front door, nothing new for the legendary eating establishment.

“I knew this was going to happen,” boasted Myrna. “We shoulda been here two hours ago!”

“I wasn’t hungry then,” replied Sol. “What, am I going to go out to eat and not be hungry? That makes no sense.” Donnie and Barbara Adams were accustomed to their constant squabbles.

“If arguing is ever entered into the Olympics, you guys will capture the gold, hands down,” said Donnie.

“Oh shut up,” said the Hirsch’s in unison.

“That’s the first time you both agreed on anything tonight!” commented Barbara.

“Can we at least agree that we’re all famished?” proposed Donnie, inhaling the smell of corn beef and

roast chicken. “Umm, savor that aroma buddy. I know you’re getting hungry.”

“I’m working on it.” The line was starting to move; most of the early bird diners were wrapping up their meals.

The hostess, middle aged tough, stocky, with blue/gray hair a foot high, sat the two couples in a booth close to the bathroom.

“Sorry folks, it’s either here or wait another thirty minutes.”

“I thought you had clout?” said Myrna, referring to her husband of thirty-plus years. “You know the owner, Sol; is this the best you can do?” The waitress snorted.

Sol, not wanting to cause problems, shrugged. “This is fine. Just bring us the menu doll face.”

“Doll face my ass,” the hostess replied.

Myrna and the Adams turned with astonishment. Sol would never approve of sitting near any restrooms. That was reserved for rubes he often said.

“What?” Sol said, exasperated. “Do I need to complain to make you guys happy?” All three were speechless.

“No dear, of course not,” said his wife. “We’re just not used to it, that’s all.”

A young brunette waitress, new on the job, came over to take everyone’s order. Donnie and his wife were already prepared, ordering roast chicken with French fries and house salads, topped off with Thousand Island dressing. Myrna bickered back and forth before deciding on her usual, a large bowl of matzo ball soup – containing one lone matzo the size of a baseball and half a turkey club minus the bacon.

“And you sir?” the waitress called out – and waited. “Sir?”

Sol finally looked up; his eyes almost popping out of their collective sockets. “Holy cow, you look like a young Jane Russell!” Myrna sneered at her husband, who finally composed himself.

“Hmm . . . uh, I’ll have a steak, medium, with fries and a large coke -- no ice,” said Sol.

“Will that be all sir?” the waitress asked.

“Missy? I’m sorry, what’s your name?” Myrna looked at her nametag, protruding outward more than most of the staff waitresses. “Uh, Helene? Make his broiled fish with broccoli and small house salad, lots of greens – no iceberg lettuce.” The waitress crossed out the first order. Sol boiled. “He needs to eat healthy,” she added in a quiet tone.

“I want a steak!” bellowed Sol, furious that his wife would treat him like a child in front of the beautiful woman. “Helene, order me the steak, only this time make it medium rare.”

The waitress crossed out the fish order and wrote down steak, again. “Are you really sure, sir?”

“Oh, I’m sure,” said Sol, defiantly. For the next twenty minutes, Sol and Myrna verbally sparred like Ali vs. Frasier.

Twenty minutes later, the waitress returned with their food. She reached inside her apron and pulled out four sets of utensils all snug in napkins. Sol’s had a serrated knife, the tip sticking out an inch. As she placed it alongside his meal, she nicked her index finger, drawing blood. Sol sniffed the air. His pupils got big as dimes as he gleamed at the small wound.

“Ouch,” Helene uttered. “I’m so sorry about that sir. Sir?”

Sol was fixated. “Here doll, I’ll lend you a hand.” He scooted out from the vinyl-covered booth and took out his seldom used handkerchief, placing it on the cut.

“Oh you don’t need to do that, I’m okay, really,” she added.

“Are you going to let him do that?” asked Barbara, surprised by Sol’s flirty behavior.

“Him?” joked Myrna, glimpsing at her husband. “What could someone his age do with a young chippy like her? Ha!”

“You’d be surprised,” said Donnie, exhaling a dreamy gaze. Barbara elbowed his shoulder. “Ow!”

Sol followed the waitress into the bathroom. “Uh sir, this is the ladies room.”

“Oh jeeze, I’m so sorry, it’s just I have a soft spot for injured waitresses. I use to be a waitress . . . I mean waiter, and I . . .” Sol finally composed himself and exited the ladies room, thoroughly embarrassed, red as a beet.

The seasoned hostess spotted Sol and gave him a stare and mouthing the words, “Dirty old man.”

Sol returned to the table and the four dined on their meals in near silence.

Donnie did his best to break the ice. “My God, you ate that steak like you’ve been fasting for days – what’s that holiday where you fast? Yummy Kippers?” He watched his friend lap up the juices with one of the patented free dinner rolls.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” replied Sol, his mouth full of food.

After dinner, the four got into Donnie’s 1976 bronze colored AMC Matador sedan, big as a boat and butt-ugly, but with an ultra-smooth ride. During the hot months, Adams kidded you could cook burgers on the broiling vinyl interior. Most of the time, he draped the seats with an oversized white beach towel with palm trees printed on it.

The two couples enjoyed a leisurely drive along A1A, hitting a Dairy Queen before returning home. Trying to work off their chocolate dipped cones, the Adams’s took the stairs to their third floor condo. Sol and Myrna rode up in the stale-smelling elevator to the thirteenth floor. Myrna entered first, placing her purse down on the living room table; Sol went straight into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and stuck it in the freezer to chill.

“You were weird tonight,” said Myrna.

“I was perfectly fine,” said Sol.

“I wouldn’t say perfectly,” bemoaned his wife.

“That was some great steak,” said Sol. He sat down in his customary seat, took the TV remote, and belched. He was still thinking about the waitress.

Sol grabbed the TV Guide then remembered. “My coat! I forgot my

coat! I better go back to the restaurant.” He grabbed the car keys and headed out the door.

“At this hour?” she asked. He was already halfway to the elevator.

Sol ventured into the dimly lit parking garage and scurried over to his car, a brown, four-door Oldsmobile Delta 88. He sped outside like a bat out of hell, the tailpipe scraping on the speed bump as he made a right hand turn going north on A1A.

It was nearing eleven at night. Helene finished off her first ever shift at the popular restaurant, leaving through the back entrance and walked over to her coolant green AMC Gremlin. Sol stepped out of his car, nestled under towering Australian pine trees, hidden in the shadows.

As he was about to approach her, a black Chevy Camaro blasting the Doors, *Light my Fire*, pulled up alongside the economy car, slamming on the brakes. A man with long black hair jumped out, walked up to Helene and gave her a kiss.

Helene shoved him away. “We’re through, I told you that now go away,” screamed the waitress, as she unlocked the car door. “You’re a class-A jerk!”

“Oh come on, I know you don’t mean that, sugar,” said the man, tall, slender – a rock and roll meathead. “I’ll never see her again, promise!”

“Go away Robbie or I’ll call the police,” replied Helene.

“You’re not calling anyone, baby,” said Robbie. He grabbed her arm, squeezing it.

“You’re hurting me! Stop it!” cried Helene. Robbie tried to kiss her again.

“Let go of her you putz,” came a voice from the darkness. Sol emerged, anger etched across his wrinkled face.

“Piss off old man,” said Robbie. The car stereo was still cranking, now playing Back Door Man.

“I said, let go of her or things are going to get messy.” Sol walked up to man, a half-foot taller, and close enough where he could smell the rocker dude’s cheap Hai Karate cologne.

“I know you, don’t I,” asked Helene, surprised. “You were here tonight – steak, medium rare, annoying wife, right?”

“Right on the button, doll face,” answered Sol.

“Oh, so pops here is your new boyfriend?” joked Robbie, wearing a thin black pleather jacket, looking very much like a cheap imitation of the late Jim Morrison. “Get outa here.” He pushed Sol to the ground with a shove to the chest.

Helene screamed as she rushed over to help Sol up. “How dare you pick on an elderly gentleman like that!” Helene looked into Sol’s eyes, startled; they looked beaming red.

“High pollen count,” answered Sol looking away quickly, “And I’m not that elderly.”

“Yes you are!” said Robbie, “I bet you knew Moses personally.”

Sol was getting extremely agitated. “You better go on home miss.” Helene couldn’t take her eyes off him as she got into her car.

The woman backed up, clipping the toes of Robbie’s black boots. “I’ll get you for that!” he yelled, as she drove away. Dancing in pain, the obnoxious young man turned to Sol. “You’re gonna get a whooping deluxe old man.”

“I don’t think so punk,” replied Sol, as he stepped up to Robbie. His eyes seethed blood red, the pupils big and round. Robbie threw a wild right hand punch. Sol ducked, catching nothing but breeze. Making sure no one was in view; Sol grabbed the young man by the throat and threw him onto the hood of his car with a thud. The car stereo skipped for a moment, then continued playing. It was the first time Robbie noticed Sol’s eyes.

“Ugh! You son of a bitch, I’ll kill you!” Robbie bellowed.

“I beg to differ.” Sol launched his teeth into the man’s slender neck, driving his extended canines deep into the flesh. Strands of blood trickled down, reaching Robbie’s black t-shirt – the dead man’s car stereo played the melancholy tune, End of the Night. Sol licked his beaming face. “How

appropriate.” He looked at his gold plated watch.

“Oy vey! I gotta get back home!”

Sol yelled. Before leaving, he placed Robbie’s body back in his own car, slumped over in the passenger side. Sol hopped in and drove off towards the intercostal three miles away. There, he spotted a gravel road partially hidden by a canopy of sea grapes, mangroves, and palm trees. A half mile in, there was an old weathered cement pier, damaged years ago by hurricane something. It didn’t matter -- as long as he could find a safe place to dump the car in the dark water.

Sol placed the car in neutral and pushed it with his newfound strength over the edge; the car taking a nosedive into the water and sank like a three thousand pound car should sink. “This is the end alright.” He wiped his hands and spat out a red goober.

Sol returned an hour later; he’d caught a cab back to Rascal House and drove home faster than an Oldsmobile should really go.

“Honey, I was so worried about you, where the hell did you go?”

“Myrna, it was a nightmare. They couldn’t find the coat – someone musta stole it,” said Sol. “Then, I got a flat tire, but to top off the evening, I got pulled over by the useless excuse for a police force. I tell you, they enjoy harassing people like us – if you know what I mean!”

“Oh stop that stupid rant,” said Myrna. “You just relax and have a nice cold beer – I took it out of the freezer before it turned to solid ice.”

“Cheers dear,” he said, kicking off his shoes. “You know I should be exhausted, but I feel like a million bucks. Let’s get cozy and watch the late show.” Myrna smiled like a teenager.

The next day, Sol slept in like there was no tomorrow. He got up and looked out the window; it was four in the afternoon. Myrna left a note saying she’d be at the pool with Donnie and Barbara. Was last night an insane dream?

Sol ventured into the bathroom and turned on the light. He squinted his eyes as he opened the medicine cabinet and popped a couple of aspirin. “I bit someone’s neck last night . . . holy crap! He paused for a moment, rubbing his eyes. “I drank a man’s freaking blood -- holy double crap!”

He ran into the dining room and poured himself a shot of bourbon. “Okay, everything is fine – Larry Fine, Three Stooges! I’m losing it here!”

Sol ran back into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, composing himself the best he could. He closed the cabinet door, but saw no reflection. “Oh for Christ’s sake, I’m disappearing here!”

“Where’s sleepyhead,” asked Donnie, wearing a straw hat and hip black Ray-Ban sunglasses.

“He’s still in bed,” squawked Myrna. “I swear all he does is eat, sleep, and couple of other things I don’t want to mention.”

“He’s been like ever since we got back,” added Barbara, “You don’t think he caught something in Romania?”

Myrna looked at her best friend. “Something happened there, but I don’t know what. And he’s not saying a thing!”

“Maybe you should call your mother?” suggested Donnie. The concerned Mrs. Hirsch nodded. “Maybe it has something to do with the night we walked around that big lake.”

“What happened out there,” pressed Myrna.

“Nothing really, except Sol got pecked by a bird or something,” said Donnie.

“A bird?” asked his wife.

“You don’t think he’s got rabies?” Myrna speculated. “I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Keep both eyes on him; it’s easier,” joked Donnie. Barbara groaned.

Sol dined on scrambled eggs and toast with jam before changing into his bathing suit. He draped his short, stocky frame in a white terry cloth robe and went to the pool area with a couple

of cold beers; he always put them in the freezer before drinking them.

Dusk approached. The pool lights automatically turned on. Sol took off his shirt and cheap rubber beach flip flops and entered the warm water, smelling heavily of chlorine. The pool guy treated the pool like a stew, adding blocks of chlorine like they were bouillon cubes. He took a healthy gulp of beer and waded in the shallow end – total peace and quiet. “I’ll work this thing out,” he murmured to himself.

“There you are!” bellowed Myrna. “I’ve been looking all over for you!” They had crisscrossed in the elevators.

“There’s just no escape, is there,” said Sol under his breath. “Hi dear, just enjoying an adult beverage. What’s cooking?”

“You’re cheerful,” answered his wife. “You know it’s dinner time.” Myrna pointed to her watch, repeatedly.

“We’re retired,” replied Sol. “We can do whatever we want!” Myrna was stunned. Her husband was finally beginning to make sense, which hadn’t occurred lately.

“Hope you don’t mind, but I’m not cooking tonight; we’re going to Rascal House again,” said Myrna.

“Uh . . . again? So soon?” asked Sol. “I was going to watch the game at the bar and grab a bite.” He grimaced after he said that. He also thought about Helene the waitress.

Myrna huffed. “Do what you want for dinner then; I’ll see you later.” Myrna walked away in her flowery yellow dress and noisy sandals.

Sol sucked down both beers and went upstairs to change. He put on his white shorts and Hawaiian shirt tattooed with pineapples and hula dancers. As always when he stopped by his favorite watering hole, he wore his worn New York Mets hat.

The Cheeky Tiki Bar, on the seedy part of Ocean Drive in Miami Beach, served good, inexpensive food and had a respectable selection of booze. Sol liked it; many of the clientele were transplanted New Yorkers just like him. Unfortunately, there was a disproportionate amount of Yankee

fans to Mets fans, and they loved to bust balls – particularly Sol’s.

“Hi Manny, extra cold Budweiser and a burger, medium rare,” said Sol. The bartender/owner was originally from Queens, New York, and a die-hard Mets fan. He and Sol got along great.

A man, mid-sixties, walking with a slight limp sat down next to Sol at the bar. “Sol, you know we love ya, but when are you gonna join the winning team,” said Elliot Gross, a retired lawyer who donned his number forty-four replica Yankee pinstripe jersey.

“How many games are the Metsies gonna lose this year, a hundred?” joked Thomas Dwyer, a former police sergeant and part time security guard at the local mall.

“Guys, don’t push it tonight, okay?” asked Sol, politely. The bar was showing a basketball game; no one was paying attention. Major League Baseball wouldn’t start for real in a month. Unfortunately, the television networks didn’t show spring training games. The Mets were scheduled to play the world champion Yankees in a night game a week from now in Ft. Lauderdale; Sol had it marked on his calendar.

It was nearing midnight. Most of the patrons had gone home. It was Sol and a pair of New York tourists: both gooned out of their collective minds and obnoxious -- typical Yankee fans he thought.

One of the men, of average build and in his late forties, wore a New York Knicks T-shirt and Yankee hat. He kept pestering Sol, slurring his words.

“We’re da world champs and we’re gonna kick your ass next week. “Reggie Jackson could beat your sorry-ass team by himself.” He proceeded to let out a burp and spill his vodka tonic.

The other man, shaped like a pear, and apparently as smart as one, chimed in. “Don’t feel so bad guy,” he garbled. “Hey, you guys just missed the playoffs last year – by what, forty games?” He exploded with laughter.

“They’re an embarrassment to the greatest city in the world,” the other man added.

Sol bit his lip and did a couple of shots with the two, even offering to take them to their hotel. “No hard feelings, right?” said Sol. The two were loaded, stumbling into the back seat of Sol’s car. The former deli owner drove to the secluded spot where he’d dumped the pseudo-rocker dude last night.

“Hey, where are we?” asked the pear-shaped man. “Where’s the hotel?”

“Oh, it’s just over here,” said Sol. “By the way; you guys ever see live alligators?”

One of the men perked up. “Hell no; but there’s always a first time!” His speech was boisterous as he pulled out a small bag of peanuts from his pocket. “Got ‘um on the plane.” The other man was near passed out in the back seat of Sol’s car, ready to throw up at any moment.

“Over here,” said Sol, as they reached the end of the dilapidated pier.

“I don’t see nutten,” he slurred. “I want to go back to the bar.”

Sol lunged at the man, digging his fangs into his neck. The drunken man cried out briefly then slumped over as Sol sucked him dry. The dead man fell into the water like a stone. Sol could taste the booze in the man’s blood.

The other man perked up in the back seat, hearing his friend’s voice. Witnessing the attack, he stumbled out from the car and tried running away through the palm-laden forest. The man yelled out for help, but to no avail; his words running together. He dodged a royal palm then smacked right into a tall Cypress tree.

Sol calmly went after the man, picking him off the moist ground.

“You still think the Mets are a joke?” Sol clutched the man’s shirt with one hand and lifted him up, his canines exposed. The man watched Sol scoop up a single drop of blood rolling down his lips, catching it with his tongue.

The man was in tears, horrified. “I’m sorry man, I didn’t mean to be a jerk, it’s just our nature as Yankee fans.”

“This is true,” replied Sol, with a smile. The man smiled back, weakly. Ten seconds later, he was dead too.

Myrna was already in bed when Sol returned home. He went into the bathroom and inspected his teeth; the pointy choppers retracted. A ring of dried blood surrounded his lips. Sol showered quickly, still smelling of swamp and boozy dead people. He changed into his pajamas and nestled up in bed, his wife snoring away. Sol stared at the ceiling fan, catching the blades rotating in slow motion. Three people dead in two days, he thought. And he still wanted more.

The next evening, Myrna and three of her friends went to a movie. Sol and Donnie declined. Instead, both went to a clothing store where Sol picked up a new leisure suit – black as death, along with a red dress shirt and black tie. He decided to wear it to dinner.

“Man o man Sol,” said Donnie, taken aback by the fancy threads. “You’re dressed to kill!”

“You could say that,” said Sol with a grin. The two walked a few blocks before stopping at their favorite Cuban restaurant, Havana Harry’s. Both men sat in a secluded corner and quickly ordered.

“Oh man, I dig these plantains, said Donnie, who’d developed a taste for Cuban cuisine big time. “And this shredded beef – good stuff, what’s it called in Spanish?” snapping his fingers.

“Ropa vieja,” replied Sol, dining on the same dish. “Not bad at all, and the black beans don’t make me fart; that’s always a plus.” The two laughed, shooting the breeze as they downed a couple of properly chilled Presidente beers.

“You know Sol, there are some major benefits to being down here in sunny Florida.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he replied, feeling good, but hankering for a human midnight snack.

The two returned to the condo building and got into the elevator. Donnie got off on his customary third

floor. Sol waved goodnight. As the door closed, Donnie watched the lights above the elevator. It started to go down. “Maybe he forgot something in his car,” thought Donnie, but what?

Sol trekked back to his car, taking off his jacket and put on his Mets hat resting on the dashboard. He pulled out of the parking lot in search for a blood fix. As he drove south on A1A, he spotted a fat man, late thirties, strolling down the sidewalk. He made a turn towards a darkened walkway that lead to the beach. Sol slammed on the brakes, parked under a pair of sabal palms, and jumped out. Since his transformation, he noticed he had much more energy and strength. Maybe this vampire stuff wasn’t such a bad thing, he postulated.

The fat man continued walking as he licked his index finger and thumb. In his coat pocket, he pulled out a can of soda. Sol surveyed the scene in every direction and moved closer. The fat man took a healthy gulp of soda then let out a monstrous, reverberating belch.

“Ah, that felt good,” said the man, who’s just polished off two racks of barbeque ribs from the Southern Pig restaurant. He took a Snickers bar from inside his coat pocket preparing to open it.

Sol approached him, meeting him on the sand-blown walkway. “Uh, you got a light son,” he asked.

“Sorry old man, I don’t smoke,” he replied, as he threw the candy wrapper on the sand, stuffing his face. “It’s bad for your health.” Sol was getting sick and tired of being referred as the ‘old man’.

Sol stared at the man’s stump-like thick neck – a blind vampire couldn’t miss that thing he thought. “Oh, that’s alright, I don’t smoke anyways.”

“Then why’d you ask?” he answered back as he wiped his mouth of chocolate residue. “That’s kinda stupid, isn’t it? Oh, you’re a Mets fan, I guess that explains it.” The man pointed at Sol’s worn cap and let out a hearty laugh, then strode right by him.

“No one makes fun of my Mets, and lives!” said Sol, thrusting his finger in the air, the heated anger flowing in his veins. The fat man laughed again. “That was pretty funny – did you use to do stand-up in the Poconos?” He sang the ‘Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge’ commercial jingle in a girly voice. Sol had had enough.

“It’s Catskills, you schmo!” Sol bellowed. “Catskills!”

The senior citizen with his newfound dagger teeth attacked the man, penetrating his blubbery neck, gorging himself on his blood. The man flopped life a fish on a dock.

“Ugh pork!” coughed Sol, spitting out blood everywhere. “Not kosher! Not kosher!” The fat man’s blood tasted like honey barbeque sauce.

“And that’s for littering too.”

Even though Sol had acquired a tremendous thirst for blood, he hoped for kosher, not pork-laden. The fat man slumped over dead like a beached whale on the boardwalk, pale as the full moon above. There was a nearby beach shower that Sol used to clean up his face and splattered blood. He rolled the fat man over the edge of the boardwalk and tucked him underneath. Rows of sea oats concealed his latest victim.

Sol got back into his car, glanced at the rearview mirror to see if there was any dripping blood; he’d forgotten he had no reflection, and headed north on A1A. At a traffic light, he spotted a familiar vehicle going in the other direction -- small, retina-burning green color, with an attractive brunette at the wheel.

“Helene.”

Sol quickly made a U-turn and shadowed the woman. Seven blocks later, she pulled into a nightclub parking lot. Sol followed right behind her, but parked farther away in the back.

“I guess I could go for some swing music,” he said to himself as he combed the remaining hairs on his balding head. He stepped out from the Olds, straightened his black tie on his cherry red shirt, buttoned his black leisure suit and headed to the entrance.

Before he even reached the door he could feel the pulsating music. “Uh oh, that doesn’t sound like swing to me.” He saw Helene standing in line already, looking beautiful in a sparkling silver stretch dress.

“Helene, how are you?” asked Sol from behind. “You look fantastic!”

“Hi mister, what a surprise seeing you here . . . at a disco,” Helene answered. “I’m sorry I forgot your name.”

“It’s Sol – Sol Hirsch, and yes, I remember yours. Are you with anyone this enchanted evening?”

Helene smiled. “I’m meeting a couple of friends, but they’re always fashionably late. You have a little spot near your lower lip.” Sol quickly wiped it off. “By the way, what happened that night with my old boyfriend, you know who I’m talking about?”

Sol began to sweat. “Oh . . . uh, that jerk? He sucker punched me and drove off in his fancy schmancy black sports car. He hasn’t given you any problems, has he?”

“That’s just it, I haven’t heard a word from him; he’s usually obsessed, but I’m thankful,” she said.

“Well, let’s not think about him,” replied Sol. They were about to enter the disco when the bouncer suddenly grabbed Sol’s shoulder.

“No old people, pops; you have to leave – now!” Helene frowned at the man’s disrespect, but not surprised.

Sol, easily a foot shorter, looked up at the man’s towering frame and flashed his boiling red eyes. “You WILL let me in, right schumck?” The man stammered in silence, almost mesmerized, before nodding in a ‘yes’ motion.

“How’d you do that Sol?” asked Helene in amazement. “I’ve seen this guy throw out football players who didn’t look cool enough.”

“I’m cool,” replied Sol, as he patted down his comb over in the breeze. “He didn’t know who he was messing with, that’s all, doll face.” The two strolled in side by side as fellow partiers headed for the dance floor. Sol began strutting

to the pulsating music in his coal-black leisure suite.

“Holy moly, what the hell is that?” asked Sol, pointing upward.

“Oh, that’s a disco ball,” said Helene. “The lights bounce off it and create a laser-light show; it’s pretty neat.”

Sol caught a blinding beam of light right in the eye. “I’ll say” The bombastic sound of the Bee Gees’ Night Fever filled the dance floor.

“You want to boogey?” asked Helene, as she held out her arms.

“Right here, in front of everyone?” asked Sol, looking around at everyone. “Oh, you mean dance? Sure, why not!”

Sol did a slow-paced shuffle, holding his own in the middle of the dance floor. People were staring at him and the young brunette, but Helene didn’t care. “You got more energy in that body?” yelled Helene, trying to be heard of the loud music.

“Oh yeah!” bellowed Sol, who flung his suit top off and hurled into the gawking crowd. He took Helene’s hand and starting moving like a twenty-year-old. The old man was dipping and jiving, before settling down into a rhythmic groove. People were staring now in amazement; the old man was a well-oiled dancing machine.

“Oh I love this song!” Helene blurted out as the Hustle reverberated throughout the building. Sol followed her every move, picking up the popular dance quickly. After the song finished, the two walked over to a circular table and ordered drinks.

“I didn’t know you had it in you,” said Helene, sweating profusely. “I’m roasting.” She waved a drink menu at her face, trying to cool off.

“That’s no surprise,” said Sol, doing the same. “Your dress looks like aluminum foil!” Both laughed as they quickly downed their sodas. Helene’s friends finally showed up, one taking a seat next to Helene. Sol sat up like a gentleman and offered his to the other woman.

“Hi ladies,” said Sol, who picked up a chair from another table and joined in.

“Are you going to introduce us to your new friend, Helene?” asked Susana, tall, dark hair with a Cuban accent.

“Oh, I’m sorry, this is Sol – he saved my life from my ex, Robbie a few nights ago.”

“Good for you Sol,” said Susana. “That guy was a first class cerdo.”

“I don’t think Helene will have to worry about him anymore,” he added, laughing. Sol suddenly began to feel lightheaded. “Sorry ladies, I think my blood reserve is a little low.

“Oh, you mean your blood sugar?” asked Maria, a spunky blond dressed in red, snapping on bubble gum. “My grandmother’s got that.”

“Excuse me gals,” said Sol, standing up slowly. He waved for Helene to come over. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but would you like to go to the Mets/Yankees game with me Friday night at seven? They’re playing in Ft. Lauderdale, my treat.”

“Oh, I don’t think so; I have to work; maybe if I get off early?” Helene was taken aback at the gesture, but appreciated the kindness.

“I’ll cross my fingers then. See you around ladies.” Sol put on his coat and headed outside; a cool ocean breeze hit him in the face. The bouncer was there, standing alone, sipping on a Coke through a puny straw.

“Hey you, old man!” said the beefy guy as he put the glass down on his stool. Once again the man clutched Sol’s shoulder, only harder this time. “How’d you get in there?”

“Hands off bozo,” growled Sol. The brute tried to grab Sol by the neck, but he swatted the man’s arm away. Sol squeezed his thick hand, and then methodically broke three of the man’s fingers.

“You fossil bastard, I’ll break your freaking skull!” The man swung wildly, clipping Sol in the shoulder. The elderly man fell over. Staggering up, Sol lured the bouncer into a dark corner.

“Over here big boy,” said Sol, taunting the monolithic man.

“Good, no one will see me whipping your wrinkled ass, old man.” The bouncer swung again. This time, Sol

sidestepped then gave the man a devastating left hook to his rib cage, breaking two of them.

The man fell to his knees like a freshly cut soaring tree. Sol jumped at the man, twisting his neck, silencing him. A couple exited their car close by. Quickly, Sol slung the dead man's arm over his shoulder, dragging him like he'd had one too many. Passersby commented how passed out the guy looked. Sol thought about stuffing him in the trunk, but opted for the back seat, "I gotta stick with smaller people," he mused.

As he passed the club entrance ready to leave the parking lot, Helene came out and spotted Sol with the bouncer slumped over in the passenger side. "Sheesh, that was close," said Sol, directing his words at the dead man. He took the familiar route to the dirt road and disposed of the body at the end of the cement pier. A congregation of alligators greeted Sol.

The next night, both Sol and Myrna were watching the news when the lead story blared out on their 21-inch television screen.

The serious-faced anchorman spoke, "A child chasing lizards on the boardwalk in Miami Beach stumbled upon a gruesome discovery this morning. Apparently, as the little boy peered through the spacing between the wood planks, he discovered the large, lifeless body of Fred Garvin, age 38, a treadmill salesman from neighboring Atlanta, Georgia. This also follows four other missing people, all male, in the vicinity. Rex Kelly, lead police detective investigating the death, said in a statement they have a few leads and hope to make an arrest soon."

"That's horrible, and right down the street from us," commented Myrna. "What do you think? Sol? Earth to Sol?" Sol had a blank stare on his face. The murder he committed was now the lead story on television. And what if they find the other bodies he began thinking. He'd been careless to say the least. Thank God for the gators, he thought. But who the hell would suspect a 71-

year-old retired deli owner from New York City committing all these gruesome crimes? No one, that's who.

"Nothing dear," replied Sol, finally. "I mean . . . a murder, here?"

"He didn't say murder," said Myrna. "They just found a dead body. She paused for a moment, thinking out the situation. "Then again, people don't normally die and roll under boardwalks."

Sol started to perspire, his ticker revving into third gear. "I think I need some fresh air."

The last time Sol made the news was back in the Big Apple. Channel 11 news did a feature on the deli owner and his legendary chicken noodle soup. He advertised it could cure the common cold. An obnoxious customer, and Yankee fan to boot, tried to sue him for false advertising. It didn't amount to anything, but it made for good publicity. He picked up his car keys and headed towards the elevator. An elderly gentleman, a year or two older than Sol, greeted him as he entered.

"You're the Mets fan, right?" asked Herbie Robinson, a former baseball player with the Cleveland Indians, used mostly as a pinch hitter and late inning defensive replacement.

"Yeah, I'm still loyal, but it's getting old," chimed Sol. "I heard you use to play ball; how long were you in the majors?"

"As they say, I had a cup of coffee in the big leagues. I ended up as an accountant in the Queen City, Cincinnati, before retiring here in beautiful Miami Beach. And you?"

"Made killer chicken noodle soup and deli sandwiches in the city," Sol replied. "And what city might that be?" Robinson asked.

"There's only one City – New York City!" boasted Sol. "Everyone knows that 'The City' can only mean NYC."

"I'll take your word for it." Robinson shrugged as he zipped up his jacket. "How do you think your Mets will do this year?"

"Spring training brings optimism; the regular season brings reality," said Sol. Well put, but don't feel so bad," Herbie replied. "My Indians sucks the big one

every year; at least your team made the World Series this decade."

"That's true, but it seems like a distant memory," said Sol, his gut telling him his beloved Mets were doomed for yet another last place finish. "You know what really chafes my ass?"

"What?" Herbie replied, anxiously waiting.

"The Yankees! The freaking Yankees winning the World Series last year and now every former New Yorker here in Miami Beach is rubbing it in my face! I could murder those bastards!"

Robinson was taken aback by Sol's raging comments; he tried to break the tension. "Oh well, it's just a game, right?" he joked. He could see the rage in Sol's eyes, which were turning bloodshot. "Is everything okay?"

Myrna went to the kitchen, poured herself a tea and returned to living room. She turned on the news only this time the news was worse.

"This just in. A gruesome discovery near the old Flagler pier in North Miami this evening as four bodies were found. Two fishermen from Hialeah noticed alligators tussling over something in what turned out to be human bodies."

"Holy cripes!" said Myrna. She quickly turned off the television again and did the crossword puzzle. "My God, I feel like I'm in New York . . . minus the alligators."

Sol simmered down, "Jeeze, is this the slowest elevator in the world?" He tried to sway the conversation. Herbie agreed, who quickly got off at the second floor. Sol stepped out at ground level and walked towards the ocean. He sat down on a blue and white striped beach chair someone had left behind. Nestling in, Sol absorbed the rhythmic sounds of the crashing waves, taking deep breaths and exhaling to calm his frayed nerves. The moon looked like it was resting on the water. In twenty minutes, he fell asleep.

The next morning, Sol awoke to the noise of cawing seagulls. He watched the tangerine orange sun rising, something he hadn't witnessed in a long time; it was glorious. The early morning warmth made him feel like a

million bucks. He headed back to the condo where Myrna was still asleep. For the rest of the day, Sol lounged on the sofa, reading a bit and snacking. He had no idea about the bodies being discovered.

After a normal dinner time meal, Sol headed to his favorite watering hole to drink beers and talk sports. The bar was noticeably void of Yankee fans. A police detective and two officers entered the bar, asking to see the bar owner.

“What’s going on here Manny?” asked Sol. “Hello officer.”

“It’s Detective,” he replied, with all the levity of a corpse. And what is your name sir?” The young man, late thirties with straight black hair, was a product of his old man, a top detective himself back in Boston for nearly three decades.

“My name’s Hirsch, Sol Hirsch” he answered in a confident manner.

“What’s the story here?” Kelly jotted down Sol’s name and what time he arrived.

The bartender butted in, “He was here earlier today, investigating a bunch of missing persons; now murders. He says they have one thing in common, and that’s . . .”

“Zip it numb nuts,” said Kelly.

Sol mouthed the word, “Murders?”

Manny turned the channel from the Incredible Hulk to the local news and saw to his horror the other bodies had been discovered. Almost all of them.

“The ‘story’ as you like to put it is four bodies were found last night. What appears to be a coincidence is these dead people may have visited this drinking establishment and all appeared to be Yankee fans. Now being from Boston and a Red Sox fan myself, I certainly know how obnoxious and stupid Yankees fans are, but to kill ‘em off is a little extreme.”

“Yeah, uh, who’d want to kill people just because their Yankee fans?” proposed Sol, his body temperature rising, his face flush.

“I see you’re a Mets fan; tough couple of years for ya, ain’t it?” said the detective.

“We’ll see,” replied Sol, tensing up. The detective eyed both Sol and the bartender intently.

“You two see anyone weird or suspicious come in here lately?” asked Kelly.

“Well, it is Miami Beach so we get our share of oddballs, but for the most part, no,” answered the bartender. Sol nodded in agreement.

“If you see anyone out of the ordinary, call me.” The detective handed the two his business card and walked out.

“Some strange crap happening here, eh Sol?” The retired deli man sighed. Things were getting out of control. He needed help.

The next day, Sol slept in. He even pinned up a dark sheet over the blinds to keep the bright, Florida sunshine from pouring in. Myrna made a long distance phone call from the kitchen to her mother in Dumbraveni, Romania. It was nearing nine at night there when Sabina Shamsky answered the phone. The operator put the phone call through; a thunderstorm of static shot from the receiver, then a clear voice spoke.

“Hi Ma, it’s your daughter Myrna from America. Can you hear me okay?”

“Yes, I hear you. You hear me okay?” she replied.

“Yes, clear as a bell.”

“I hear you too clear as bell. Everything alright in America?”

“Kinda. I need to ask you something; it’s very important.”

“Shoot my dearest Myrna. What is problem?”

“It’s Sol. The problem is with my husband. Since we returned, all he does is sleep all day and act weird. What happened to him? Hello? Ma, are you there?”

Sabina remained silent, but finally spoke up. “Sol had look in his eyeballs.”

“What?” screamed Myrna. “Eyeballs?”

“I saw look deep in his eyes. He is among the living dead now!”

“The living dead?”

“He is a demon of the night!”

“A demon of the night?” Myrna was practically pulling her hair out.

“He is . . . a strigoi!”

“Stringy? I can barely hear you now. What the hell are you saying?”

“Oh for Christ’s sake my dear, Sol is a vampire!”

On the other end of the phone Myrna paused, then blurted out with laughter.

“A vampire? Come on Ma, Sol may be a lot of things, but a vampire?” Myrna paused again. “Are you serious?”

“Take mirror over his face to see reflection,” said Sabina. “You go now and do while the beast is asleep.”

“Hold on for a second; I’m putting the phone down.” Myrna reached into her purse and pulled out her compact mirror and entered the bedroom. She tiptoed over to her snoring husband and placed it a foot above his face. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

Myrna bent down on one knee to see if Sol’s reflection was present. She looked at his face, then glinted at the round mirror. No reflection. “Holy sugar!” Myrna cupped her mouth to muffle her scream. Sol, sleeping on his side, opened one of his eyes slowly, spotting his kneeling wife.

“Huh?” he mumbled.

“You go back to bed deary; I was just looking for my lost ear ring. See -- got it right here, nightly-night.” She patted Sol on the head and walked back to the kitchen, then picked up the phone, trembling.

“Hello Ma?”

“What you see, my child?”

“Child? I’m 68 years old Ma.”

“You will always be my child. Now, what you see?”

“Nothing! I saw nothing! What the heck do I do now?” She paced back and forth, twirling the curled phone line with her index finger.

“Stay strong my dear. There is still chance he can be saved,” said Sabina.

“I know just the person who can solve vampire problem.”

“Who’s that?” Myrna wondered with desperate hope in her voice.

“My cousin Barlow,” said Sabina. “I will send him on next flight to solve your Sol vampire problem.”

Myrna hung up the phone then quickly called her friend Barbara. “Hi Barb, it’s

me. May I borrow your crucifix for a while?”

Barlow's flight arrived the next evening. Myrna was at the airport, alone. She knew this whole vampire thing was crazy, but something had to be done. The creepy man emerged from the plane and picked up his matching black leather luggage. He spotted Myrna who dressed up for the occasion. Barlow kissed Myrna's hand and gave her a big hug. He took off his black coat and sunglasses, perspiring already. “This weather strictly for birds my dearest Myrna.”

“It's the humidity that'll kill ya,” she answered with a slight smile. “In my county, avalanche will kill you!” added Barlow with a hearty laugh. Sol went to the Cheeky Tiki Bar and shot the breeze with Manny. “Kinda lonely in here, eh?” he joked, almost leaning too far back in his bar stool. The only other people in the bar were a vintage couple of south Florida booze hounds; sporting bleached out hair and faces wrinkled like shar-peis. “This is serious,” said Manny. “Whoever this fruitcake is, he's literally killing off my business!”

“Don't worry; the police will get 'em,” replied Sol, grabbing a handful of pretzels from a plastic bowl. “Now let's watch Dallas.”

Sol arrived home near midnight and quietly placed his car keys on the dining room table. As he slinked towards the bedroom, he noticed the television on, and his favorite recliner moving back and forth -- Myrna never sat in 'his' recliner. Sol inched closer. On the screen was Dracula, starring Bela Lugosi.

“What a ham!” said a flamboyant voice, the Eastern European accent familiar. “Hello?” Sol called out.

A tall lanky man leaped from the comfy chair. “Sol, I so glad to see you!” said Barlow as he wrapped his long, spindly arms around the shorter man.

“What the hell are you doing here?” replied Sol, startled.

Myrna and mother of Myrna ask me to visit. I understand you have problem?”

The gangly man eyed Sol's face intently and nodded. “We need to talk.” The next day, Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch, the Adams, and Barlow ventured to Rascal House for lunch. Helene came over to take their orders. Barlow stood up and greeted the woman by taking her hand and kissing it.

“My dearest woman, I am Barlow, and what is your name?”

“It's Helene,” voiced Sol, a slight feeling of jealousy painted his now reddening cheeks. Barlow gave Sol a sneering glance.

“I am pleased to meet you Helene. Are all American women as pretty as you?” Helene blushed. “I'll be right back with your food.” Sol excused himself to use the restroom and trotted over to the waitress.

“I apologize for his weirdness. He's from a creepy town in Transylvania.”

“That would explain it,” she answered.

“Oh about that game, I'd love to go; I've never seen a baseball game in person.

“But you need to know we're just friends, okay? People may think I'm moving in on your territory.”

“Understood,” replied Sol, who deep down, felt the same way.

“Pick me up here at six?”

“Perfect,” said Sol. He went back to the table with a smile as big as the Grand Canyon.

The five enjoyed light conversation over hot pastrami and ice tea, but Barlow kept pestering Helene whenever she made an appearance near their table. Sol finally asked Barlow to back off.

The tension was soon thick as a patented Rascal House deli sandwich. The five returned to the condo. Sol, Donnie, and Barlow brought a few beers down to the pool area.

“So what do you think of Miami Beach?” asked Donnie, who after five short years residing in the Sunshine State already considered himself a Florida native.

“Ocean is beyond beautiful Mr. Adams, but hot sun is no place for me.” Donnie looked at his watch, excusing himself. “Going cloth shopping with the misses; see you around.” He didn't look happy.

Barlow observed Donnie slinking away then leaned closer to Sol. “So, what problem you have?” he said with an uncanny grin. “Whatever it is, we nip it in bud, eh?”

“Barlow? I've changed, and I don't mean for the better,” said Sol. “What can you do for me?”

“I think I know what problem is,” he said. “Many strange things happen in Dumbraveni.”

“You do?” replied Sol.

“Yes. I bring potions from my county – but you must drink them religiously, okay?”

“Okay,” nodded Sol. “When do we start?”

“We start after dinner tonight!”

exclaimed Barlow. “You got to take on full stomach.”

“I'll have to do it later; I'm taking Helene to the baseball game very soon.”

Barlow's eyebrows arched, rising above his sunglasses. “I see.”

Sol started to feel uncomfortable.

“Wow, look at the time – gotta go. I promise to take the medicine when I get back.” He raced up to the condo, changed, and headed back out.

Barlow sat still, all alone now. He consumed a full bottle of beer in one gulp and flashed a Cheshire cat grin. “Baseball.”

Helene and the other waitresses were finishing up their shift when one of them screamed. “Helene, get over here – hurry up, hurry up!”

“What is it?” she asked. Her friend pointed to the television. It showed a black sports car being hauled out from the water. “The victim identified as Robby Kroger of Hallandale, age 23, dead in the passenger seat,” said the news anchor.

“I don't believe this,” she screamed before bursting into tears. “I mean we broke up and all, but for someone to murder my . . .” Helene sat down and tried to regroup.

“Who would do such a thing?” her friend Andrea asked. “What a sicky.”

“Are you gonna be okay?”

“I'm alright; I'm just . . . stunned,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “I need to get

out of here.” Helene left through the employee entrance when Sol pulled up. He rolled down the window and called out. “Right on time,” he beamed. Helene wasn’t sure what to do; she was in a fog.

Sol parked the Olds and ran over to open the door. Helene paused for a moment then sat down in the car, almost forgetting what she was doing. Sol closed it then hopped back in on his side. “Buckle up.”

Sol was giddy to not only see his beloved Mets up close and personal, but to see them with a bombshell like Helene. “Oh hell, people will think she’s your father,” he thought to himself – or maybe grandfather. Sol groaned.

“Why so quiet?” asked Sol. “You’re usually very talkative. Is everything alright?”

“I’m sorry. I just found out something.” Helene leaned against the window, looking down. She spotted something red against the beige interior. Blood? She became nervous, having a flashback of seeing the bouncer – possibly dead, in the passenger side of Sol’s car.

“Found out what?” asked Sol. “Is it a family issue? Sorry, I don’t mean to get personal.”

“Uh no; not really. Someone I knew . . . he . . .” Helene pondered jumping out of the car at the next red light, but stayed. Sol had an idea what it was. He clammed up then changed the subject. He was certain she didn’t care for the jerk anymore, but still; knowing your ex-boyfriend’s body was found dead could be unnerving to say the least. Ten minutes passed in silence. “So, are you excited to see the game tonight?” asked Sol as he turned up the air conditioning a bit.

“Oh yes, I’m really excited to see the Yankees!” replied Helene. She proceeded to rattle off some of the players names. “Reggie Jackson, Jim ‘Catfish’ Hunter, Willie Randolph, even Goose Gossage. Did you know they won the World Series last year?” Helene was originally from Madison, New Jersey, and like her family, a Yankee fan.

Sol sighed. “Oh, I didn’t know that.” Everything was going so great, he thought to himself. Ugh, she likes the freaking Yankees fan too! There’s just no escape. “I’m actually a die-hard Mets fan. Let’s just hope it’s a good game.”

The two arrived at Ft. Lauderdale Stadium with time to spare. The 8,000 seat facility was less than half full, due to the inclement weather. Sol bought a couple of hot dogs and sodas. Helene got close to the Yankee dugout and took out her Polaroid camera, pressing away, spitting out picture after picture. Bucky Dent came over to get a closer look at the attractive waitress.

“She’s with me dent head,” barked Sol. “How about taking a few pictures of the Mets players?”

“No thanks, I don’t want to waste my film,” said Helene. “Oh, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No harm, no foul ball,” mused Sol.

Helene gave a half-hearted laugh. The two walked over to the Mets side of the field and sat down, less than twenty rows from the field. Perfect.

A booming voice came over the loud speaker. “We apologize for the slight delay folks. We’re having some problems with the field lights, but we should be starting in a few minutes.

The game finally started as Sol and Helene chowed down on their ball park cuisine. After four innings, Sol told Helene he was going to the little boy’s room. When he returned, Barlow was in his seat, dressed in black wearing a Yankee cap.

“What the hell are you doing here?” said Sol, perturbed. “Or should I ask ‘how’ the hell did you get here?”

“I flew,” laughed Barlow. “I was just chatting with beautiful Helene. She does not mind I sit with you.”

“Of course not, sit; sit,” said Sol, who was getting suspicious of Barlow. And how exactly was this creepy guy from Eastern Europe really going to help him with his ‘problem’?

The game progressed nicely for Sol, but having Barlow there was disturbing. The Mets were actually winning, but the lighting continued to flicker on and off.

The evening sky was in twilight with ominous dark gray clouds rolling in. The weather forecast said occasional thundershowers, but so far, only a mild sprinkle of rain fell.

“It was the bottom of the sixth. The Yankees rallied for five runs off a minor league scrub pitcher. The Met’s manager asked for time as he made a pitching change, touching his left forearm to bring in a south paw.

Both Sol and Barlow excused themselves to use the facilities. The lights flickered again. The voice said they may need to call the game. The three thousand fans in attendance booed. “Just kidding, folks -- let’s hope and pray the power doesn’t cut out.”

The two men went into the restroom to take a leak. Barlow finished up and went to wash his hands. Sol glanced at the tall man, but couldn’t see his reflection. He zipped up and turned to Barlow.

“You son of a bitch, you’re a vampire!” Sol’s eyes turned red. Barlow returned the favor, showing off his elongated canines.

“Yes Sol, you and I are the same – well almost. His glaring eyes seem to burn right through the former deli owner. Two guys came in to use the bathroom. Barlow shot them a menacing glare and the two ran off.

“You see, I wanted to come to states and experience western culture. I enjoyed the company of wife Myrna, but after seeing Miss Helene, I realize I must have her. She is beautiful creature and I will make her mine.

“Over my dead body,” threatened Sol.

“Undead body my friend,” replied Barlow. “You are almost fully undead. The only way you return human is to kill me. And that will not happen.”

“It was you, wasn’t it?” sneered Sol, as he rolled up his sleeves, preparing to brawl. “You bit me that night across the lake.”

“You are semi-smart Mr. Hirsch,” replied Barlow, who calmly walked in a slow circle, stalking the shorter man.

“I unfortunately did not sink fangs deep enough into your flabby neck. You’re

friend Donnie who tells bad jokes, saved your life.”

“My neck’s not flabby, pumpkin nuts – and Donnie is funny . . . well, sometimes.”

“You are flabby old man, and you are no match for me.” Barlow looked at a stall door and punched a hole clear through with his right fist. “That will be you.”

“Don’t call me old man.” Sol seethed.

“And I understand Mets are very horrible ball club, unlike Yankees, yes?” Sol became furious. “No one makes fun of my Mets, and lives!” Sol bore in towards Barlow, who took a wild swing at the shorter man. Sol ducked, following up with a left hook, sending the taller foe to the ground, coughing. “Just like Smokin Joe Frazier you putz.” Barlow stood up, his completion now a pale blue, teeth gleaming and razor sharp. “Uh oh,” said Sol.

The soaring vampire picked up Sol by his shirt and through him against the wall, smashing the mirror. Sol winced in pain, his back jabbing into the faucet. Again, Barlow stalked over, picking him up, and this time prepared to bite his neck. His mouth opened wide, the canines on repulsive display. Sol screamed. “Hey look, it’s Reggie Jackson!” Barlow turned, falling for the distraction. As he looked back, Sol gave him a head butt and poked his eyes with his fingers.

“I knew watching the Three Stooges would come in handy one day!” Sol ran out of the bathroom towards his seat, but the stadium was in total darkness, with a light drizzle falling.

“Helene? Where are you? Sol called out. He heard a muted scream.

The lights popped back on and the announcer yelled ‘play ball.’ Sol spotted Helene sitting near the dugout with Barlow by her side. He ran towards her. “If you . . .”

“Take another step I will kill her,” said Barlow, in a calm voice. Now sit down and let’s watch baseball.”

“At bat it’s Reggie Jackson!” The crowd cheered. The World Series hero took a huge cut at a fast ball, missing.

“So what are you going to do Sol?”

Barlow taunted him. Helene was terrified as the taller man gripped her thin arm. He ran his elongated, sharp fingernails across Helene’s neck.

“You better not hurt her, you bastard!”

“Tough words from an old man,” he replied, laughing. The announcer called out strike two.

“You know, baseball can be boring game. It is time to leave, my love,” said Barlow. He got up and started dragging Helene along the first row. People were booing him as the towering man blocked their view. Sol eyed Helene, who elbowed Barlow in the throat. He let go of Helene, who jumped over a row of seats to get away. Sol dove into the vampire, forcing him to the ground, and punching him. Barlow emerged with his right hand clutched around Sol’s throat, lifting him completely off the ground.

“Hey, down in front!” yelled a handful of fans.

“They gotta be New Yorkers squeaked Sol, who could barely breathe. Barlow opened his mouth ready to . . .

“Oh how gross, whad’ya gonna do, kiss ‘em here?” yelled a heavy set man.

“Get outta here and do that stuff somewhere else!”

“Get a room,” another called out.

Just as Jackson made contact, the lights cut out, leaving the ball park in total darkness. The bat severed in two, the barrel part sailing in the direction of Sol. He poked Barlow in the eyes again and dropped to the ground. The sharp, splintered piece of wood impaled Barlow straight into his heart. The vampire staggered and dropped to his knees before slumping over on his back.

Barlow laid in agony. Sol, full of rage, used his meaty fists to hammer the bat farther into his chest. Blood gushed from the wound. Barlow howled in pain, turning various shades of death; his face becoming withered and boney; his body deflated. The lights slowing came back to life. In seconds, only a pile of cremated ash laid at Sol’s feet. Jackson swung at the next pitch and launched a mammoth home run over the right field

fence, putting the Yankees in front by a run.

Sol abruptly sensed as if all the bountiful energy from his body evaporated at once. His shoulders slumped and he felt . . . normal.

Sol sat down, exhausted, then stood up quickly. He saw Helene hiding behind a row of seats.

“Helene, are you okay?” He helped the frightened woman up, giving her a hug.

Sol assured the waitress that Barlow was indeed no more. Both sat down, not sure what had just happened.

“Holy crap,” screamed Sol. “Do you have a compact?”

“Uh, yeah,” she replied. “Look Sol, I don’t care how you look.”

“Please hurry,” he pestered her. Helene handed Sol a small, silver rectangular object. He flipped it open and gazed into the mirror. There, before his very eyes, he saw his chubby cheeks, wrinkles and all.

“I can see myself! I can see myself!” Sol danced around and gave Helene a big bear hug.

“So can we you ass hole, now sit down and shut the hell up!” said a Yankee fan, sitting a dozen rows back.

“God bless you New York fan,” cried Sol, tears running down his cheeks.

“Am I missing something here?” asked Helene. “Where’s that horrible man, Barlow?”

“He musta flown the coop,” joked Sol, his back achy fully now. “Hey, how do my teeth look?”

Helene inspected his opened mouth. “I guess they look okay, although . . .”

“Although what?” cried Sol, “Is it my canines?”

“No, it’s your breath; it’s pretty bad.”

“Ah, that’s just Sabretts and sauerkraut.” Sol gave a sigh of relief. “I think it’s time to leave.”

“But the game’s not over yet; don’t you want to see if your team wins?”

“Doll face? I’ve already won.” said Sol. “Let’s go.”

“Sol, can you promise me one thing?” asked Helene.

“What’s that?”

“Please don’t call me doll face anymore; it’s really annoying.”



**Excerpt from Stranger Passing
coming April 22 (Chapter 1)**

By Edward White/CP Bialois
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The cold rain pelted against his cloak as Reinhart's leather-gauntleted fist hammered against the wooden gate. A moment after his final strike, a grating sound of metal on metal cut through the night air as the gatekeeper pulled aside a metallic slide big enough to reveal a portion of his face.

The gatekeeper had never been one to appreciate being awakened in the dead of night. Irritable at what his life had become, his grizzled face peered through the opening in a sneer towards the stranger. "What in blazes do ya want at such an hour?"

Reinhart lifted the hood of his cloak from his head, allowing his eyes to be seen, and locked them on the gatekeeper's. "Entrance into your city."

The gatekeeper stared at him for a few seconds in an effort to size the man and his profession. Men coming to the gate at such a late hour had a reason for doing so, not that it was his business. He just didn't want to have his job questioned and be put out onto the street like a common beggar. Feeling he was a good judge of character, the gatekeeper nodded and slid the small cover closed. Loud clanking noises signaled the locks on the gate were being opened and the door positioned in the center of the massive wooden wall opened enough to allow Reinhart entrance into the small city.

The fact the door opened at all surprised Reinhart, as he expected to

be told to move along. Had he been a bandit, this would've been a golden opportunity. Whatever reason the gatekeeper had for allowing him entrance, Reinhart wouldn't complain and was pleased he'd have the opportunity for a dry bed to sleep in for the night. Once inside, the gate closed behind him and he got his first good look at the gatekeeper.

Despite the man's age, he had a burly build with white tousled hair and dirty beard. The sword held in his right hand was steady, telling more about his combat prowess than would've been possible had Reinhart not been deemed worthy of entrance. Reinhart wagered the man could face an Ogre and win, or at least he could've when he was younger. The look in the man's eyes told Reinhart his assessment was correct.

"Alright, yer in. No trouble from ya, else the Magistrate will have yer skin." There were few duties the man had as gatekeeper, but one of them was to assess anyone entering the city. The new arrival's eyes gave him away as a man knowledgeable about how to use his weapons, but unless he did something stupid by the gatekeeper's post, his skill wouldn't be tested. With his work done for the moment, the gatekeeper turned towards the small alcove off to the right of the gate. Behind the alcove stood a small stone hut he used as a home when not on duty.

The sight of the man's dwellings reinforced Reinhart's conviction when it came to his life on the road. Being a ranger was anything but easy, but it proved more dignified than being thrust aside and having to work for the bread one already earned. At least the man that greeted him had a roof over his head—Most couldn't claim that much as a benefit to their job following years of service.

Reinhart couldn't help noticing the man's severe limp as he walked. Most people walking in such a manner were either born with the malady or suffered an injury of some sort. Given the way the man held his sword and the look in

his eye when he stared Reinhart down left little doubt as to the man's profession before being "retired". Woe to the warrior forced to survive as that wretch was forced to, with no dignity or respect from any but the occasional passing warrior.

The ranger pulled his cloak tight around his neck while forcing the images and thoughts of his own future away. Was it truly better to live with the possibility of having no one to mourn his death? Was the freedom the life of a ranger offered worth dying in some unknown forest on the blade of some half-assed warrior dreamer? The question never bothered him much, but when it did, it made itself known to him with a vengeance.

He spied what appeared to be a tavern or inn ahead of him before a crossroads. The chances the owner remained awake were slim, but no man turned away silver for a night's lodging. *At least, no sane man.* With a chuckle, he continued along his path, allowing his mind to focus on what it wished too. There was nothing for him to be worried about in this small town, as everyone that could pose a threat were either in bed with their woman or passed out from drink. Such was the life in the solitary towns in the Wilderness.

When he drew close enough to make out the sign above the door, he smiled and nodded. The one constant in life, besides death, was the layout of cities and towns. The business areas were easier to spy than the living ones due to their depravity and proximity to the gates. So much the better for him and others of his profession. Without such places, one would need to channel their inner Elf and would surely have a bad time of it.

The walk down the narrow street proved to be an adventure in sidestepping rain puddles more than anything else. Reinhart chose not to bother avoiding them. He was already soaked through and it'd take most of the night to dry out his belongings, assuming he'd find a place with a fire at such a late hour. If it were up to him, the rainy season of the southern

Wilderness could go to the Abyss along with most of the people living there. Of all the places on Pyrain, he doubted there was anyplace comparable to the Wilderness so far as the dregs and rapscallions.

Striding up to the door, he refocused his thoughts before grasping the doorknob and entering. Much as he expected, the common room was dark with the exception of a low fire in the hearth behind the bar. As wet as the outside was, the inside wasn't much better and thoughts of a dry bed and fire to dry his belongings faded. Water poured in through several openings in the roof and where it didn't, the water came down in a constant trickle. In many ways, he would've been better served to find a comfortable tree to stay under for the night. At least it would cost him less silver.

As far as common rooms went, calling it such was an insult to the name. The two tables looked as though they were thrown together shortly before he entered. Off to his right, the bar added to the depressing feeling of the room. Constructed by setting a flat plank of wood across a pair of chopping blocks, he was surprised it could hold the weight of the man leaning on it.

The man watched him with passionless eyes that were better served to sizing up an opponent than greeting a customer. "What can I do for ya, stranger?" His voice had a grating quality to it caused by drinking too many Dwarf spirits. His bald head shone in the pale candlelight from the few holders around the room and his greasy moustache looked as if it held the lice and fleas his head was incapable of anymore. Had he not been a ranger, Reinhart would've felt like a future victim of the man.

Reinhart returned the man's expression without flinching. He'd sooner go to the Abyss by the hand of a child than allow himself to be thought of as a mark. "I'd like a room... and what passes for a meal around here."

A cough came from the corner to Reinhart's left where an old man sat, bent over a bowl of cold stew. He could

feel the man's eyes watching him as he and the innkeeper discussed business. Reinhart assumed the old man was the innkeeper's father as the two looked too much alike for there to be any other conclusion to be drawn. Turning his eyes to the old man, he was rewarded by seeing the old man squirm under his gaze. Though half the innkeeper's size, Reinhart had the impression the old man was good with a knife. He made certain to remember the face in the off chance there were any "disturbances" while he rested. Assuming, of course, he remained there. The tree in his mind's eye was beginning to look more appealing to him by the second.

In an effort to get Reinhart's attention back on him, the innkeeper turned his head to spit on the floor. "Rooms're all gone. All's I got are the stables. Ya don't mind horses and fleas, do ya?" Both the innkeeper and old man burst into laughter at what they were certain would be the ranger's discomfort. Had the ranger not often slept under conditions that would cause both men to stop breathing, their ploy may have had a chance to work.

Continuing to smile, Reinhart reached under his cloak to a hidden pocket for his coin purse. Over the years, he mastered the ability to pull coins out without showing anyone where they were kept. It was a trick he learned from a Halfling of all people, and it helped save his life several times through intimidation alone. Many of those he met during his travels feared he was a mage for his sleight of hand. Reaching for his money in such a manner had the desired effect on both the innkeeper and the old man, even more so than the broadsword strapped to Reinhart's left side. Until then it'd been hidden under his cloak, but with his subtle movement, its worn handle and chipped scabbard caused the color to drain from both of their faces.

"This should cover it." He tossed three silver coins onto the bar. "Horses'll be better company and have less fleas."

Anger flashed across the innkeeper's face at the implied insult,

but at seeing the silver and knowing Reinhart over paid for the room by two coins, he let the insult pass. He'd make up the difference another time. He motioned towards the back of the inn with a nod. "Around back, you'll find it easy enough. What name do ya go by?"

Reinhart turned towards the door, pausing before pulling it open and stepping back into the rain. "Death, to those who cross me." Seeing the color drain from the innkeeper's face once more told him he wouldn't have any trouble from him that night, at least not directly. Before the innkeeper could utter a reply, Reinhart was through the door. The only proof he'd ever been there was the water soaked floor and the three silver coins on the bar.

To his surprise, the stables were as dry and warm as the plains, with a handful of horses lounging in their stalls as comfortable as they could be. Reinhart picked a stall with fresh straw strewn about and began to make himself comfortable. It took a few minutes for him to pile the straw in a corner into a passable bed, but he was pleased with the result. While he couldn't build a fire without a stone or earthen hearth, he could at least lay out his cloak for it to dry and propped his boots upside down against the wood runners next to him. He then draped a majority of his wet clothing over the sides of the stall away from any horses. He wasn't interested in waking up naked with his clothing being chewed on and dragged through horse dung. Just because he experienced worse didn't mean he wanted to welcome such an experience. His last act before settling in his straw bed was to light one of the candles he carried with him and place it in one of the lamps left hanging at the opening of the stall by a stable hand. Having it burning around dry straw was dangerous, but it was safer than building a fire and the benefit of it hurting an intruder's night vision was too great an opportunity to pass on.

The idea that the stables were in better condition than the inn brought a smile and laugh from him. The only

reason he could think of was someone else owned the stables and allowed the father and son tandem to use it for their guests. Before drifting off to sleep, he wondered if the stable's owner knew the pair was making money off of him. Probably not, he reasoned. Otherwise the doors would be locked or the two would've been run out of town. As strange as that sounded, it helped him to fall asleep feeling a modicum of safety.

When sleep did embrace him, Reinhart welcomed it as if it were a long lost lover. Despite his life on the road and the physical exertion such a life wrought, he was never one to fall asleep with ease. Raised to be a ranger and to live without a great deal of effort in the wild, he was taught to sleep with one eye open in the most comfortable of places. Under his intensive training, he found few people in the world cared about him beyond what he could do for them. It was the law in the Wilderness, away from the kingdoms of man, Elf, and Dwarf. It was his life and he felt no remorse over the direction it'd taken over the years.

With sleep also came the imaginings of his mind and the conjured memories pleased and tormented him. His wet clothing was gone, replaced by their dry counterparts as the sun hung overhead, warm and bright. After a moment he began to remember that day, the day he left Lucille to find his way in the world. *Has it really been ten years?* He shook his head to chase the thought away. How could it be so long? He could still see her house as it always stood. Even the sights and smell were the same.

He paused along the path leading away from the village and looked back over his shoulder. Lucille hadn't come out to see him off after their fight. With a sigh, he turned back to face down the path and take another step when an odd sound caught his attention.

When his eyes opened, he was back in the stable. He was too well trained to thrash about and make unwarranted noise and remained quiet. Not sure what pulled him from his

sleep, Reinhart felt grateful to whatever had caused the sound. Even after ten years, he didn't want to go back to those memories. He remained motionless, listening for any out of place sound that'd give away the reason for him being awake. While he was grateful to have his dream interrupted, he was even more so in that it prevented his throat from being slit while he slept.

After another few moments, he began to think the sound was a remnant from his dream. As he was about to close his eyes and go back to sleep, the sound of one of the horses shuffling and a quiet shush from someone outside the stall he was in caught his ear.

Reinhart's eyes sparkled with a knowing look as it appeared the innkeeper hadn't been frightened enough. Without a noticeable movement or sound, his right hand gripped his sword handle. Life in the Wilderness taught one to be ready to fight at a moment's notice and he was no exception.

When hunting, the key is to have patience and outwait one's prey. So it was with beasts, so it was with the peoples of Pyrain. Reinhart's wait lasted a few more seconds before the old man appeared from behind the wooden post.

With ability defying his age and reason, the old man approached Reinhart without making a sound, as if he were floating above the straw and dirt floor. When he was close enough, the old man reached out a grease-covered hand for the cloak hanging off to the side to dry.

The thought of the old man having some supernatural power flooded Reinhart with dread when he noticed how easily the man moved. Only Elves moved in such a smooth manner, but from what he'd seen, the man was just as human as he was. *A former ranger then?* The thought did have some merit, but there would be time to worry about such concerns later. In an instant, Reinhart leapt to his feet, resting the point of the sword below the

old man's left armpit.

"If you value your life, you'll not move... friend."

The old man nodded his understanding and swallowed. "I wanted to check on you... thought you was asleep."

Reinhart barely smiled, both of them knew the old man's intention. The fact he may have been a former ranger fled Reinhart's thoughts. He was nothing but a simple thief. "I'm fine. May I suggest you return to your bed before your death catches you." With a snarl, the old man turned and made his way towards the entrance with a stomping sound belying his earlier grace. Before he made it three feet away, Reinhart's voice stopped him cold. "I expect a good portion of stew in the morning for my trouble. I'm sure you agree." The old man nodded his head, sneering once more before stepping through the stable door and into the night air.

Once he was alone, Reinhart sheathed his sword and began pulling on his cloth under garments and then his leather armor. While they were still damp, they were better than walking through the town in the nude. He could understand the old man's outrage at being caught in the act and getting chased away. He wasn't certain how the old man would handle being bested by a naked man that was supposed to be sleeping.

With his own protection in mind rather than offending the sensibilities of anyone he may stumble across, he finished dressing and flapped his cloak after taking it from the corner post of the stall. Like the rest of his belongings, the cloak was still damp, but had dried more than the rest of his attire. The stiffness of the cloth was oddly comforting to him.

The dancing shadows his movement made drew his attention to the lamp. He was pleased he decided to keep it lit with a six-hour candle. Otherwise he may have been forced to kill the old man instead of chasing him off. The candles were a hard commodity to come by as the leaders

of the various towns never wanted to part with them. The feeling of protection their soft glow offered was often worth ten times their weight in gold, given the proper circumstances. The candles were often used in street lights for the larger cities, but the truth was the men governing them cared little for the populace they ruled. The candles remained with those that could afford them with very few exceptions aside from guard posts and the like. Being one to never rely on creature comforts, the idea he needed or wanted the candles was foreign to him. Until recently, he'd never been one to quibble over such things as material wealth. Those arguments were better served by the local mayors, magistrates, or whatever they chose to call themselves, instead of a warrior like him.

It took several attempts at flapping his cloak, but he was pleased when it became pliable enough to wear and swung it over his shoulders before closing the clasps near the yoke of his throat. Fully dressed, and in ill humor considering the need to wear wet clothing after being warm and comfortable, he blew out the candle and placed it with the others in the small satchel he wore under his cloak. To best keep it out of sight and out of his way, he rested the strap over his left shoulder, allowing the satchel to rest against his right hip. With his sword sheath at his left side, he could get to either of them without any inconvenience or hesitation.

Ready to continue his trek through the Wilderness, he made his way to the stable door and the darkness outside. The moment he dropped the three silver coins on the bar he knew the chances of his remaining there for a full night were low. Even worse, he couldn't afford to eat any of the stew after his actions for fear of poison. Despite the fact the stew was most likely made from rat or some other vermin the innkeeper and his father managed to capture and kill, the stringy, sour-tasting meat would've been as welcome as the warm broth.

Had the old man found the purse, he would've crept over and slit Reinhart's throat without a second's hesitation and blamed it on some bandit that found his way into town. Reinhart doubted the local constable would do more than a brief investigation before agreeing with the father and son. Hired law men made him nervous. There was something about them that couldn't be trusted. Not by him, at any rate.

Thinking over his entrance at the inn, he guaranteed he would be attacked the moment the coins were dropped onto the table. It was a conscious act on his part, trusting in the image he displayed being enough to ward them off.

Reinhart chuckled to himself as he closed the stable door. Despite his internal grumbling about the two men, the real reason he did it was to test them. He wanted a fight, an excuse to kill someone so he had reason to feel as dirty as they were. Few things in life made sense, but the need to impose one's will on a weaker, lesser being had its place in the hierarchy of nature. He stayed his hand to prove he wasn't a cold-blooded killer. *Not yet.*

With the door closed, he turned back and faced the blackness the few street lamps fought their nightly battle against. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the cool, after-rain air. The sensation of cleanliness would last until the moisture settled since the rains had stopped for the night. Satisfied, he opened his eyes and began walking down the street towards the town's gatekeeper to be let out. Keeping his eyes focused in front of him, Reinhart felt heartbroken that the sensation of the cool air would give way to the smell of man and their city within an hour, two at the most. This was the way the world worked, teasing one with something pure and then taking it away without a warning.

He never broke stride through the muddied road as he made his way to the gate and roused the grumpy old man from his alcove once more. At first the gatekeeper regarded him with fury

in his eyes, but after thinking better of a confrontation, the middle-aged man hobbled to the large metallic bar that locked the gate.

"I never seen one to sit still less'n ya. Yer business done, I take it." The gatekeeper grunted as he pushed at the heavy steel bar to the left of the gate. Reinhart thought about helping him, but decided against such an action. The man still had his pride, even if it involved a job such as he now had. The large arm swung upwards and the gatekeeper's push triggered the counter weight. In less than a heartbeat the gate was unlocked, allowing the gatekeeper to pull the door open. "Beggin' yer pardon, but would ya get the hell out 'fore ya wake me again."

Reinhart tried to stifle the smile threatening to betray his thoughts as he walked past the man. Before he stepped through the gate he turned and held his hand out. The gatekeeper eyed his gauntleted hand with suspicion.

"What ya want now?"

Reinhart shrugged, "From one warrior to another. Without waiting, Reinhart opened his hand and let six gold pieces fall from his fingers.

The gatekeeper moved with impressive speed, displaying that his agility hadn't left him despite his injury, and caught all the gold pieces before they came close to the ground. "Where'n ya get this? A robbery?"

Reinhart shook his head; there was only one robbery attempt that night. "It was payment... gratitude, for a job well done. I'm passing it on." Without another word he turned and stepped out of the gate and away from the small town. The gatekeeper watched him for several moments until the night swallowed the ranger.

Not believing his eyes, the gatekeeper looked at the gold in his hands and let out a boisterous laugh. It was a year's salary and he'd make sure no one knew about it. With a grunt, slam, and loud clang the gates were closed and locked. He hobbled to his alcove, pushing the gold pieces into a hidden pocket in his dirty and worn tunic. It was the first time they held

anything besides filth in years, and he planned on enjoying it.

The road outside the town's walls was superior in how it handled the rain due to the lack of foot traffic. People only traveled through the Wilderness if they had a necessity, and even then not without armed guards. Reinhart made good time and shortly after an hour of his journey, he settled under a large willow tree. The ground was warm and soft, offering a thin covering of grass and dirt for him to spend the remainder of the night. As his eyes closed, he thought back to the dream he had earlier and the events that caused it.

Stepping outside, he breathed in the cool, relaxing scent of morning-after-rain air. It was one of the few pleasures he allowed himself to indulge in as his life was a spartan one. The only deviance was the occasional warm bed and meal, a combination he enjoyed for the previous month in the small village he stumbled upon. That morning was when he planned on leaving the village and her behind forever.

Lucille had been everything he could've ever asked a woman to be for him. In the short time he knew her, he found himself enamored with her more than anything else in his existence. Had he believed in the Gods, he would've prayed to each of them in turn, thanking them for bringing such a flower into his dreary world. As each day progressed, he found himself becoming more comfortable with Lucille, pleased by her constant company and pleasant smile.

She was so different and wonderful he thought about staying with her, to forget his choice in life and his vow never to become what his parents had. Thinking of them brought a fresh rush of emotion. Not love or regret at his alienation, but a steadfast anger and determination to follow through on his oath. Lucille was wonderful, but she was a danger to what he was meant to do in his life. Against the many voices and parts of him wishing to remain, he

dressed and left her small cottage before she could wake.

Having told her of his plan the night before, she hurled a wooden bowl at him before breaking into tears. Didn't she know he wanted to stay with her? Didn't she understand what he was meant to do with his life? The power behind his vow? When he woke, he knew the only thing to do was to leave, to give her the opportunity to move on with her life. As he made his way along the path, the village had yet to wake from the previous night's slumber. When he paused to look back, he expected her to be at the door watching him. Maybe she'd even come after him. Had she done either of those, he never would've left, as seeing her would've broken his resolve. It was the final chance he could give to her when she deserved so much more. When nothing stirred aside from the morning breeze, he turned and continued along the path.

The tranquil sound of a songbird brought Reinhart from the depths of his slumber. Squinting and attempting to blink the sleepiness away, he looked to the east at the rising sun. Judging from its position in the sky, the day was an hour old. Stretching where he sat propped against a willow tree, he let out a low groan. The last time he'd been able to sleep so soundly was ten years earlier. His thoughts trailed off and he shook his head to clear away the memory. It was bad enough he dreamed about Lucille for what could've been all night, he wasn't about to allow himself to suffer through the day as well.

In a moment of curiosity, he wondered what he owed it to more, mental or physical fatigue. Neither idea gave him any comfort as he felt lucky he could still breathe. Sleeping too soundly made him a perfect target for thieves and bandits, not to mention any snoring he may have done. Since his throat hadn't been cut, he assumed he hadn't uttered a sound during the night.

He remained where he was, relaxing and taking in the morning for a

few more minutes. His cloak kept him warm through the night despite the dampness of his clothing and armor. Still, the dampness carried its own chill that crept into his body while he slept. The ensuing stiffness meant he had to force himself to move.

Once on his feet, Reinhart inventoried his belongings. He felt by his hip to ensure his sword remained, as well as the dagger hidden in his right boot, and his satchel. The only thing missing were the gold pieces from the inner pocket of his cloak, but he remembered giving those to the gatekeeper the night before.

Pleased a new day was beginning without the intervention of a thief, he stretched once more before readying himself to continue along his path. His stomach began growling at him, but he wanted to put more distance between himself and the town from the previous night. He didn't think the father and son would want to come after him, but he suspected they might lie to their Magistrate and accuse him of stealing. Nothing of consequence would be done, but they'd search at least an hour's trek from their home before giving up. While being outside that limit by a quarter hour, he didn't want to press his luck. Things had been too easy for him over the last few days and he didn't want to be around when things turned sour.

He'd stop and eat some of his dried bread and cheese at mid-afternoon. By then he should be far enough away that no one would trouble him. With his first step from the comfortable embrace of the willow, Reinhart thought back to his dreams and decided he'd done the right thing by leaving Lucille in her village. A solitary life was difficult, but he knew who could be trusted and didn't have to worry about someone leaving him like he did back there.

Such things as friends and trusted companions were for fairy tales and legends. Scoffing at his own remark, he wrapped his cloak about him and continued along the road. Although it was mid-spring, the days had been uncommonly cool for the last couple of

weeks and he needed to get moving to try to stay warm. To do otherwise with damp clothes and only a cloak to wrap himself in was foolish and would bring about his death sooner rather than later. A few quick gusts of wind found their way under his cloak, chilling him, but he refused to stop before putting enough distance between him and the town to ensure his safety.



FNN

By Jamie White

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“Hello. This is Ann Stevens for Fable News Network. I’m standing outside the home of the three bears, where it seems an intruder has been found.” She looked to her left and then back at the camera. “There’s one of the victims now. Let’s see if he’ll talk to us.” Ann motioned for the cameraman to follow her and walked over to a big bear dressed in a shirt and hat.

“Excuse me, sir. May I ask you a few questions?”

The bear’s gaze drifted from her to the cameraman and back. He shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with us. Now, can you please tell us what happened here?”

“Well, we were going to get some breakfast, but the porridge was too hot again. So we went out for a walk to let it cool off. We got back and this crazy chick is in our house.”

“What did you see when you first walked in?” Ann pointed her microphone at the bear, fake concern

crossing her features. She just knew this was going to be a great story.

“Well, we got into the living room and someone was obviously using our chairs. The kid’s was destroyed . . . he’s gonna be complaining non-stop until we get him a new one. Then, we noticed some of the oatmeal was eaten. I mean, really. Can you believe it? Who breaks into a house and eats your food instead of just taking something? This girl is not right.” He rolled his eyes and gestured periodically through the rant to emphasize his point.

Ann nodded, once again trying to convey a sense of empathy while wondering what the ratings on this piece were going to be like. Maybe she’d win an award finally to make up for getting robbed on the Sleeping Beauty report. “I see. So nothing was taken from the house? What else did you find?”

“Nothing, but the food. That’s not the weirdest part of this whole thing, though.”

Ann’s left eyebrow raised, confusion in her eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

The bear shook his head, a small laugh escaping him. “You wouldn’t believe it. I wondered if I was imagining things, too. That is, until the wife and kid saw the same thing.”

“And what was that?” Her voice carried a hint of excitement, although she tried to hide it.

“The crazy chick was actually taking a nap in one of the beds! Can you imagine? I mean, who breaks in a place and decides to sleep awhile? I tell ya, I’ve seen some stupid things, but this really takes the cake here.” He shook his head.

“You should’ve seen her face when she woke up and saw us looking at her. She ran so fast, she was nothing but a blur. They’re still looking for her now.”

Ann nodded. “Well, there you have it. An intruder is on the loose in Fable world. This is Ann Stevens for FNN. Back to you, Bob.”

Paralyzed By Jamie White

Rosalie stifled a scream and cowered under her blanket. She had to be having some weird dream that felt like she was awake. That was the only thing that made sense to her. There was no way she’d seen what she thought she’d seen walking by her bedroom door.

The figure was tall and so pale, she could see right through it. It seemed to pause outside her bedroom door a minute. She could swear it even looked in her direction. When it did, she held her breath, trying to bury herself further in the blanket.

What a joke... she would’ve laughed at herself if her vocal cords would cooperate. Every muscle in her body was paralyzed, but her mind was racing. She knew whether she made a sound or not, it was no use. The thing, whatever it was, had seen her. Rosalie was trapped in her bed, her eyes fixed on the door while praying the thing would just go away and leave her alone.

Wake up, wake up, wake up. The words ran through her mind like a mantra, hoping that would end the situation. There were no such things as ghosts and monsters; she’d been told that a million times. She had to be dreaming and she remembered her older sister talking about being able to will herself awake.

Normally, she’d take anything her sister said with a truckload of salt. The older girl spent most of her time trying to scare Rosalie, especially after they’d seen a scary movie. Still, it was worth a try. What did she have to lose?

It’s not working. The thought came with a wave of terror. Was she imagining things or had the figure come closer to the door? She hoped not, but it looked like it. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was it had. What did it want from her? Why couldn’t she just wake up and end the whole thing?

Because you’re not dreaming, genius. The thought made her freak out

more than she already had. As long as she could keep pretending this wasn't real, she was safe. A dream couldn't hurt her, but this was most definitely not a dream. Briefly, she tried to convince herself that it was an intruder. As crazy as that sounded, an intruder seemed much less terrifying than the alternative.

The figure outside her door tilted its head as it continued to stare at her. Rosalie bit her lip and watched, wishing she could get her vocal chords and limbs to cooperate with her. After what seemed like an eternity, the figure straightened up and backed away from the door. Rosalie watched as the figure turned and moved to the girl's left, slowly moving out of the doorway.

As the figure disappeared from view, the young girl breathed a sigh of relief. The fact her voice was working at all startled her. She looked down towards her feet, wiggling a toe. She could move again.



The Hunted
By Etheridge G. Lovett

On the Thursday evening of February 12, 1852, a proud hunter named Joe Calhoun, journeyed through the biting cold winter elements from Texas to South Dakota to hunt big game. Joe heard about the large herds of buffalo, roaming freely throughout the Black Hills of South Dakota. Joe also heard about the legendary White Buffalo that wittingly protects other buffalos from hunters venturing out into the Black Hills. This legend prompted Joe to visit South Dakota to see for himself, such

an interesting creature. If the buffalo existed, Joe planned to bring down the great beast single-handedly.

Riding upon his favorite horse, Caroline; Joe trekked across the snow-laden plains to the small bustling hunting and gold miner's town near the Black Hills of South Dakota known as Deadwood.

After entering the town, Joe left his horse at the town's holding stable to be cared for overnight. Joe entered the Red Rooster Saloon to relax and unwind from his long journey. The moment Joe entered the saloon; you could hear the distinct jingling sound of the fine silver spurs he wore upon his tough, well-crafted cowboy boots. A sudden blast of frigid air, mingled with large snowflakes, followed Joe as he pushed his way through the swing doors of the saloon. Piano sounds, laughter, and loud conversations permeated the popular saloon.

Several people fixed their eyes upon the tall, handsome young hunter approaching the bar, wearing some of his hunting gear. Two ammunition belts, laden with shotgun rounds, were strapped across his chest. Two .44 Caliber Smith and Wesson single action revolvers were neatly placed inside holsters attached to his belt. He also wore a long coat made of tough buffalo hide, with another thin gray coat barely seen underneath it. On the side of his belt, Joe wore a well-crafted Cheyenne Indian hunting knife. He wore his long blonde hair platted down his back. The only hair upon Joe's stern face was the long mustache he wore, curled up at each end. The mustache was so thick that you could barely see Joe's top lip. Joe's sea-blue eyes scanned the room of high-spirited visitors who were all gambling, drinking, and frolicking about with the sensually attractive saloon girls.

Those who noticed Joe entering the saloon began to lean to one side, whispering to each other.

"Bartender, I'll have a bottle of Jim Beam whiskey," Joe requested, placing his wide-brim, black hat upon the counter.

"A bottle of Jim Beam whiskey coming right up," said the bartender, preparing the drink.

"Pardon me for asking, but where are you headed, Mister?" asked one plump gambler sitting at a table near Joe.

Taking a quick gulp of his whiskey, Joe answered, "I heard that there's a menace up in the Black Hills, killing off most of the hunters around here. I thought I'd come here and offer my services to get rid of him. You see, I take the death of any hunter personal."

"Well, I hope you brought the U.S. Calvary with you. That menace you spoke of up in the Black Hills is like the devil in white buffalo hide. One witness said that the White Buffalo stands eight feet tall, weighing around one and a half tons. Some men believe it's a spirit," the plump man said with a slight chuckle.

"If the White Buffalo breathes, it bleeds. If it bleeds, it can roll over and die. It's just another beast of the field to be tamed, maimed or killed. Besides, I don't believe in spirits. That's hogwash... I only believe in my rifles," Joe said, taking another drink from his bottle of whiskey.

The plump man stood, walking over, shaking Joe's hand, saying, "Mister, you're my kind of man. My name's Nick Mosley. I'm the Mayor of Deadwood."

"I'm Joe Calhoun, a buffalo hunter from Dallas Texas."

"Joe, I want you to meet my gambling buddies," said Mayor Mosley, as he and Joe walked over to his table.

"Listen up everyone; I'd like you to meet my good friend, Joe Calhoun, visiting us all the way from Dallas Texas. He's a buffalo hunter. He traveled many miles to come here and rid the Black Hills of the White Buffalo," Mayor Mosley informed.

Everyone in the saloon went silent for a minute, gazing upon the young hunter after hearing the mayor's words. Some onlookers whispered to each other. Concerned about the young hunter, one old Cheyenne Indian tracker, with a head full of snow white, long hair, stood; approaching Joe. The Indian

grabbed Joe firmly by the shoulders, looking deep into his eyes, saying, “Listen to me, Mister, if you go up into the Black Hills to hunt buffalo, you will surely regret it. As long as you and other hunters continue to hunt the buffalo in the Black Hills, the White Buffalo will continue to attack. Whatever you do, stay away from the Black Hills. Go back where you came from and you won’t be harmed.”

Assuming that the old Indian tracker simply wanted the elusive White Buffalo to live so that he, and his people, could maintain their fear over the small town, Joe became outraged. Joe pulled out one of his Smith and Wesson revolvers, turned the weapon over, striking the Indian across his mouth with the butt of the weapon, knocking the Indian to the ground. Everyone in the saloon was shocked at Joe’s explosive reaction. Several cowboys laughed at the dazed Indian sprawled out on the floor. Gathering himself, the old Indian sat up, wiping the blood from his split lip with his hand. He stared at the blood upon his fingers; then gazed up at Joe with a frown. The Indian pointed at Joe’s face, saying, “Remember, I warned you not to go up into the Black Hills.”

“Some of you boys get this fool Indian out of here before he gets himself killed!” Mayor Mosley shouted. Several local cowboys grabbed the Indian by his shoulders, dragging him outside in the freezing cold. They went back inside the saloon, laughing about the incident. Joe twirled his revolver around upon his finger a few times for show; then shoved it back down into his holster. He walked over to the bar to finish his whiskey.

“Well, if you need any extra supplies for your hunt just let me know before you leave. I promise you, hunting the White Buffalo won’t be a Sunday picnic,” Mayor Mosley said.

“Thanks, but no thanks, mayor. ‘I’ll be just fine. These are all the supplies I’ll ever need,” Joe said, patting his hand upon his Smith and Wesson revolvers. “These metal saviors haven’t let me down yet.”

Everyone laughed at Joe’s arrogant response.

“Can you use a little extra attention tonight courageous cowboy?” asked one attractive saloon girl, approaching Joe. Her eyes were sea blue, like those of the young hunter. Her blonde, curly hair shone like fine gold. Her body showed no flaws. Her sweet smelling perfume filled Joe’s nostrils as she drew closer. Joe eyed the voluptuous woman from her head to her feet; then he answered, “Sure. I could use your kind of attention any night.”

“Come up to room seven when you’re ready, cowboy, and let me show you a good time,” the woman offered. She smiled, walking up the winding stairwell. Joe consumed the final gulp of his whiskey, leaving the empty bottle on the table. He placed a one dollar bill beside the bottle then followed the woman up the stairs to her bedroom. The mayor smiled, watching the young hunter disappear in the shadows upstairs.

The Next Day

Despite the biting cold, the morning sun peeked through an opening in the white-laced curtains, striking the closed eyelids of the young hunter. Feeling the warm sunshine, Joe’s eyes blinked several times. He awakened, sitting up in bed. Rubbing the back of his neck, he glanced over, noticing the saloon girl sprawled out, nude in bed beside him. Joe smiled. He reached over, grabbing his pants from a nearby table, reaching into the pocket of his pants to get his wallet. Joe left three dollars on the table for the saloon girl’s sexual services; then he went over to a large tin pail of ice cold water, wiping himself off. He pulled out his straight razor and shaved. He dried himself off and put on his shirt, ammunition belts, weapons, coat, and boots. Flipping his fancy hat upon his head, Joe glanced back at the young woman still asleep in bed. He tipped his hat, quietly exiting the room. Joe casually exited the saloon, walking towards the holding stables.

“Good morning, Mr. Calhoun. I guess you’re ready for your horse, Caroline,” one old stable hand said.

“You’re absolutely correct. I have a long day of hunting ahead of me. I need to get a head start before the weather turns,” Joe said.

“Caroline rested pretty well last night. She slept like a newborn filly. I also changed her horse shoes to make the hunting journey easy on her. I took good care of your saddle gear as well,” the stable hand said.

Joe checked over his horse; then he checked over his saddle gear to make sure that everything was there.

“You got a pretty nice set of weapons there fella,” the stable hand said.

Joe half smiled, grabbing one of his rifles from his saddle bag, saying, “This here is a .50 Caliber Sharps Buffalo Rifle. Most hunters call it ‘Old Reliable.’ My other rifle is a .44 Caliber Winchester rifle with a 24 inch barrel. Then there’s my two .44 Caliber Smith and Wesson, single action revolvers. To top it off, I have a genuine Cheyenne hunting knife that I stole off a dead Indian.”

“I see you’re ready to kill a lot of buffalo today,” the stable hand said.

“Not a lot of buffalo, one buffalo in particular. I’m traveling up into the Black Hills to bring down the great White Buffalo, putting an end to a local legend. If I have enough sunshine and rounds left, I’ll probably kill a few extra buffalos for sport,” Joe bragged, glancing off at the Black Hills in the distance.

“I certainly wish you all the luck on God’s green earth, Mister. When I was a young man, I went up into the Black Hills with a close friend of mine to hunt buffalo. We saw the legendary White Buffalo with our own natural eyes. The creature stands taller than a man and seemed twice the weight of an average buffalo. Me, and my friend barely escaped with our lives when the creature attacked us. My heart darn near jumped out my chest. I have never been up there since. So far, no hunter has been able to stop the great White

Buffalo. Indian legend says that the white buffalo's a spirit. A spirit's not something you can shoot and kill with a bullet," the old stable hand said with a concerned look upon his face.

Gazing into the eyes of the old man, then up at the ban of cirrus clouds in the frozen blue sky above, Joe smiled, answering, "I really don't believe in spirits, old man, but I'll leave you with a bit of sound advice, stay out of the Indian camps listening to their empty legends and foolish tales." Joe climbed upon his horse.

"I hear you talking, Mister, but I know better. My old eyes have seen much, and my old ears have heard much. Spending time on this Earth makes you very wise, if you live long enough to pay attention. I have a bad feeling about you going up into the Black Hills, Mister," the stable hand said.

"I hear you, old man," Joe said, handing the man two dollars.

"Thanks, Mister; I sure appreciate it," the old man said.

Joe reached into his pocket, pulling out a small lump of snuff, placing it between his bottom teeth and his gums. He tipped his hat to the old man, spitting off to one side of his horse. With a slight kick of his fancy boots, Joe rode away from the stables down the main street of the small town.

"You take good care of yourself, Mr. Calhoun!" Mayor Mosley yelled, standing at the doorway of his office.

"I'll be just fine, mayor!" Joe shouted back.

The mayor half smiled, muttering under his breath, "You damn arrogant fool."

Joe's horse galloped down the snow-covered road in the middle of the small town as he neared the town's edge.

"Take care of yourself; Mr. Joe Calhoun!" shouted the saloon girl, waving from a second floor window.

"I'll bring you back something real nice, honey!" Joe vowed.

"I'll be waiting, Joe," the woman shouted back, her girlfriends standing behind her, giggling.

Other town members watched the young hunter riding past the city line, heading towards the Black Hills in the distance. Gentle gusts of frigid air blew across the snowy open plains as the lone hunter vanished from the view of the town's people. For an hour, Joe rode until he came upon the area the Indians called the Sacred Hunting Grounds.

"Whoa — Caroline!" Joe shouted, pulling on the rings of his horse. Caroline slowed to a mere trot; then she stopped. Joe climbed down from his horse; closely examining several fresh buffalo hoof prints pressed deep into the snow. The prints led off into a rocky, forested enclave, partially covered in snow.

"Come on, Caroline," Joe said, grabbing his horse by the rings, walking with her towards the narrow enclave. The frigid wind howled like weary ghosts, blowing through the Black Hills. Faintly drifting upon the cold breeze was the loud, deep and eerie roar of a lone buffalo, echoing throughout the Black Hills; then it stopped. Joe grabbed his favorite shotgun, Old Reliable, loading several rounds. His keen eyes scanned everything that twitched or moved, but not one buffalo was in sight. Only dead silence remained. Joe shoved his rifle down inside his saddlebag, following the buffalo hoof tracks pressed upon the ground throughout the snow-covered, wooded area.

"I know you're out here somewhere, I can feel it in my bones," whispered Joe, frowning. As he walked further over a small hill, Joe noticed in the center of the woods, a large clearing. In the middle of the clearing there stood a small herd of bison. In the center of the herd of buffalo there stood the legendary White Buffalo.

"There you are. You're as good as dead," Joe whispered. He carefully removed his shotgun from his saddlebag. He tied his horse to a nearby tree, slowly lowering himself down into the cold, fresh-fallen snow aligning the crest of the hill.

"Take your last breath, legend of the Black Hills," Joe whispered to the White Buffalo. He aimed his shotgun at the head of the large beast, firing his rifle. The buffalos surrounding the White Buffalo ran around in a panic. The White Buffalo remained still, staring in Joe's direction. The creature blew several breaths of hot air from its nostrils and mouth, angered by the mere presence of the young hunter.

"Damn it. How did I miss?" Joe questioned. He glanced down to quickly reload his shotgun. When he raised the weapon for another round of shots, the White Buffalo was gone, so were the other buffalos. Only the voice of the White Buffalo was heard, roaring aloud throughout the brisk winter breeze.

Standing to his feet, Joe brushed the snow from his hands, chest, and stomach, untying his horse from the tree. He hopped upon his horse, riding down the hill into the clearing. He sat there, trying to make sense of the vanishing buffalo.

"I got all day and night, damn you. You can hide in the woods until Hell freezes over, but I'll find you, and bring you down!" Joe shouted, brandishing his shotgun high above his head. The sound of the buffalo's roaring voice suddenly went silent.

Joe laughed aloud, his face pointing towards the cool sky above.

As he continued to laugh, a thunderous pounding sound was heard all around him. When Joe looked off to his right, he saw the incredibly large, White Buffalo, charging towards him with great speed. Before Joe could aim his rifle at the creature, the White Buffalo struck Joe's horse with a thunderous impact, knocking Joe Calhoun high into the air. Joe landed in the snow several yards away from his bleeding, dying horse, Caroline. The White Buffalo charged onward up the hill, vanishing beneath the tall trees in the distance.

"Hang on, Caroline!" Joe yelled. He crawled over to his horse, weeping beside her. The horse, kicked several times, trying to get up, but it couldn't. The wounds the White Buffalo inflicted;

slowly dragged Caroline into the shadowy realms of death. With her eyes stretched wide, Caroline panted several times. She drew her last breath, releasing her spirit into the freezing winds of the Black Hills.

“Damn you!” Joe shouted from the pit of his stomach. He hopped to his feet, pulling out his two revolvers. Joe began shooting in every direction, firing at everything that moved. Tears streamed down Joe’s stern face as he unleashed a hail of bullets across the horizon. Streams of blazing gunfire jumped from Joe’s powerful twin revolvers as he wept for his loving horse, Caroline. He fired his weapons until he only heard the clicking sound of the hammer of each gun, striking, but finding no more bullets to ignite. With his revolvers still in hand, Joe fell forward upon his knees before Caroline. Joe wept bitterly over her death. As Joe wept, he heard the loud trampling sound of buffalo hooves coming from the narrow path of the snow-covered forest area. Joe stood, looking in the direction where the sound came from. He saw a large herd of buffalos charging towards him.

Filled with a burst of rage over the death of his horse, Joe pulled out Old Reliable, firing upon the buffalos, bringing them down, one by one. Even the young buffalos fell under the blast of Joe’s powerful rifle. “You killed my horse, now I’ll kill buffalos by the hundreds!” Joe shouted. He reloaded his weapon and continued firing. Between shots, Joe heard a loud, distinct buffalo’s roar, filled with rage, ringing out behind him. When Joe spun his rifle about, that was all the time he needed to fire one blazing shot right into the forehead of the great White Buffalo approaching. Blood spurted from the buffalo’s large head, but the creature kept charging, striking Joe with a bone-crushing blow, knocking Joe Calhoun unconscious. When Joe regained consciousness, he was laying flat upon his back with pain streaking throughout his body. As Joe lifted his head, he looked directly into the large, cold black eyes of the White Buffalo,

staring back at him. The huge creature was lying motionless across Joe’s legs in death.

“Damn you!” Joe shouted when he realized that the dead buffalo had fallen, pinning him to the ground with its incredible weight, crushing both of his legs. Trembling from the intense pain and cold weather, Joe reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a bottle of whiskey. He took several quick gulps of the whiskey; hoping that the strong drink would somehow dull the pain, but the excruciating pain continued. Joe feared that death was closing in on him. Laying flat upon his back, Joe watched the pristine white snowflakes trickled down from the blue skies like angels descending from heaven. The dead silence seemed almost surreal to the young hunter. He looked off to one side and noticed Old Reliable lying in the snow, broken apart by the impact of the White Buffalo. Joe lost consciousness once more.

“Joe Calhoun, wake up!” a familiar voice beckoned. When Joe opened his eyes he saw the old Indian he attacked inside the saloon standing over him. Beside the Indian he saw a black horse and a wooden carrying platform the Indian made from dried tree branches and leather strips. The carrying platform was neatly attached to the saddle on the Indian’s horse.

“Where’s the White Buffalo?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t see a White Buffalo. I only found you laying out here in the snow with your legs busted up something good,” the Indian said.

A confused look formed upon Joe’s half-frozen face.

“Drink this, it will help keep you alert until I get you back to town,” the Indian said, holding the back of Joe’s head, administering an old Indian medicine that he’d made from natural herbs. The bitter taste of the medicine caused Joe to frown.

“I warned you not to come out here, but you didn’t listen to me, young hunter from Texas. Now look at the terrible shape you’re in,” the Indian

reminded, carefully dragging Joe’s broken body upon the platform. Joe gritted his teeth in pain. The Indian placed Joe snugly into the platform, covering him with several hand-woven, wool blankets. The Indian climbed upon his horse, riding slowly out of the Black Hills, in route to the town of Deadwood. When they made it to town, people watched as the horse dragged the platform, with the brave hunter nestled inside, towards the town’s doctor’s office.

“Everyone, get back!” shouted the doctor, pushing his way through the crowd towards Joe. The doctor pulled back the blankets and saw Joe’s busted legs.

“My goodness, what happened to him?” the doctor asked the Indian.

“He tussled with the great White Buffalo and lost,” the Indian said.

“Un-strap him and bring him inside my office—quick!” the doctor shouted.

The old Indian carefully untied Joe from the carrying platform. Several men helped place Joe inside the doctor’s office.

Grabbing the doctor by his shirt, Joe asked, “Doc, will I ever walk again?”

“You’ll be lucky if you remain alive after getting busted up like this,” the doctor answered.

Joe rested as tears seeped from the side of his weary, reddened eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mister, I’ll do everything I can to save you, you damn fool,” the doctor said, working frantically on Joe.

“Thanks, doc,” Joe replied. He turned his head to one side, looking out of the window at the small crowd of people gathered outside the doctor’s office. Standing in the crowd of onlookers, Joe’s eyes fell upon the old Indian who saved him. The Indian drew closer to the window of the doctor’s office with his hands pressed against the glass. He peered through the window at Joe with a blank stare upon his face. At that very moment, the snowstorm began once more. A strong gust of wind blew past the old Indian, causing his snow white hair to blow upward, twirling about in the winter

breeze. Underneath the Indian's long hair, Joe noticed the shotgun round hole in the center of the Indian's forehead.

At that very moment, Joe Calhoun fully understood why the Indian tried to prevent him from hunting buffalo up in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Joe quickly learned that the Indian, and the White Buffalo, are one.

Poetry Place



V. E. M by vgs

She was orange, lime, purple and pearls

Not really into lace,

and loved to celebrate her African race.

She was Thanksgiving, she was Christmas

She lived the Kwanzaa Nguzo Saba

And said Habari Gani? each day.

She celebrated Umoja for Unity and Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa and Nia for Purpose,

Kuumba Creativity and Imani her Faith in the Divine.

V. E. M was a Poet, a Playwright, a Teacher and Emcee.

Almost forgot she was a Thespian too, Remember Miss Ianthe, Ray-Ray and Miss Lou?

Were you fortunate enough to see her perform?

Did she make you laugh, leave you in stitches,

or rolling on the floor?

She was the best entertainer,

She made scrapbooks with pizazz

She decorated her home and Her classroom with her 'brand' of Diva flair.

V. E. M loved to dance, she loved to travel

She loved her Eric, Barry and Vinnett,

She loved me and she loved you!

She lived to be

Vivacious, Excellent and Magnificent!

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