

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



Stiletto Hell: Sole Survivors

(The follow-up hit sequel to Stiletto Hell!)

By DiVitto Kelly

It was late April. Harold Bailey, stiletto attack survivor, woke up with that queasy feeling in his innards. For months, he'd contemplated spilling the truth to his wife about that fateful Halloween Eve, but knowing how inconceivable his encounter was with the satanic shoes, he could not divulge a word.

"No," he said to himself gazing at the bathroom mirror after a brisk tooth brushing. "I can't risk losing my job, or costing my family any embarrassment." On one occasion after downing a few beers at a neighborhood block party, he half-jokingly spilled the beans to his next door acquaintance, a beat writer for the local newspaper. The man thought Harold's fictitiously wild tale would make a good story.

In the end, he simply tucked the 'incident' deep beneath the pine floorboards of their vintage house. The sanitized version was he stumbled over the towering red footwear in the middle of the night and somehow managed to impale his thigh on one of the heels, although that didn't quite explain his rabid desire for barbecuing them in the fireplace.

A couple of weekends later, on a picture-perfect sunny Saturday afternoon, Harold's wife Kathy managed to pry her husband away from watching Yankee baseball. Instead, the two found themselves smack-dab in Greenwich Village, New York City. The two had lunch at Anthony's Coal-Fired Pizza, splitting a medium cheese pie littered with black olives, onions, and green peppers. They sat outside, café-style, sipping on their matching Corona beers, minus the lime slices.

Afterwards, the two browsed a cavernous used book store sandwiched between two competing antique shops. Harold owed his wife a full afternoon in the city big time for destroying her skyscraper high devil red stiletto heels, a gift from the vivacious Miss Andrea, a passionate shoe-shopping extraordinaire.

Harold ended up purchasing a vintage copy of National Geographic, a 1968 February issue titled Sharks: Wolves of the Sea, along with a finely covered edition of Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, one of Harold's favorite books.

After stepping outside, Kathy's cellphone rang, chirping loudly like a mockingbird. "Hello? Oh hi

Andrea. Hey, guess where Harold and I are?"

"The mall?" said Andrea, art teacher at the K-8 Saint Anthony Catholic School. She returned from medical leave back in early January from her fateful encounter with the shark skin pumps, although she was still recovering from the multiple bite wounds to her arms and legs.

Like Harold, there was no way in heck Andrea could divulge what had really happened that night, although her take of events was somewhat of a stretch. And, like Harold, if she had mentioned anything, she'd be taking up space in the unemployment line in a heartbeat. She was fairly certain the head priest at Saint Anthony Parish would assume a certain horned man drabbed in red had taken up residency inside of her petite frame. Not a good thing if you're working for a Catholic school.

"I'm hanging in there, just kinda lounging on the sofa with the cat," answered Andrea, snacking on sea salt pita chips. "Doctor says it'll be another couple of months before I can start kick boxing again."

"I still can't believe how badgers got into your house and ambushed you like that; it's like something out of a bad horror movie," said Kathy. Of course the truth was infinitely more bizarre. It'd make a Twilight Zone episode feel like Sesame Street. Those shoes, those damn shark skin shoes.

"I know, tell me about it," answered Andrea. She too had nightmares about the run-in with the feeding frenzied stilettos. The two chatted on and on as the Bailey couple strolled along the city sidewalks.

Harold glanced up at the sky and noticed grayish clouds rolling in. The punctual man cursed himself for not bringing along an umbrella. They stopped at a corner intersection then proceeded to march towards a small park with a playground. Kathy was giving her friend a play-by-play as they strode by a slew of street vendors.

“Whoa, check out the daggers on these babies,” commented Kathy as she picked up a pair of gleaming crow black stilettos off a line of folding tables covered in rich colored tapestries. “Andrea, you should see the shoes they got here. Hey, is this where you bought those slick red puppies for me?” Kathy turned towards the owner. “I’m sorry ma’am, what’s the name of your store?”

The middle-aged woman with distinctively olive-skin features and long wavy black locks was finishing up a transaction with a young woman. Her abundance of silver bracelets slinked up and down as she gestured with both arms.

“Thank you and have a most eventful day,” she said. Her excessive eye makeup made her look an Egyptian goddess, albeit one on the disheveled side.

“I’m sorry darling. How may I help you?” replied the woman, slyly.

Kathy spotted the sign hidden behind a pair of towering knee-high hot pink camouflage patterned boots. “Oh here it is, never mind” she said, in a cheerful voice. Kathy was savoring her venture into the Village, now realizing just how exceptionally dull suburban life could be. “Madam Celeste’s Shoe Emporium. Ooh, I like that. Andrea? Hello?”

Andrea sprang up from the sofa, the cat jettisoning off her lap with an annoyed howl. A wave of trepidation shot through her still mending limbs. “Uh, yeah, that’s the place,” she replied nervously. “Hey, can I speak with Harold for a second, real quick?” Kathy handed the phone over to her husband as Madam Celeste polished her sales pitch.

Harold stepped away out of earshot, suddenly feeling weighted, just like his children any time they had to do clothes shopping at the mall. “Hello Andrea? How are you doing?”

Despite the aches, Andrea began feverishly pacing the parquet wood floor in her living room. “Harold, don’t let Kathy buy anything from that woman, you hear me?” Harold wasn’t keen on his wife buying any type of shoes with a heel over an inch high, not in the least, but he did owe her, even if . . .

“Listen Harold,” barked Andrea, getting Harold’s attention. “That’s where I bought those shoes, the red stilettos for Kathy and my pair of shark skins that tried to eat me like freaking Jaws. Those shoes are pure, unadulterated evil!

Harold began to sweat. “Oh God, she’s already browsing.”

“Crappola,” blurted out Andrea.

“What do I do?” asked Harold, eyeing his wife, who was in full shopping mode.

“Damn,” stammered Andrea. “I know, I know. Tell Kathy you’ll buy her a brand new pair of those God-awful poo-brown ducky boots she likes so much. What’s that banal catalog she drools over?”

“Uh, LL Bean?” he answered, failing to divulge his liking for their flannel shirt collection.

“Yeah, LL Bean! Tell her you’ll buy her two pairs. Just get her away from that crazy lady!”

“Okay, okay,” Harold shot back.

“Hurry!”

Suddenly Harold’s near-healed thigh wound began to throb. He turned towards the line of folding tables filled with shoes, a battalion of mix styles and colors. All were of the high heel variety. And they all seemed to be staring at Harold, like they knew that HE knew that . . .

“No, not those!” screamed Harold, as he spotted his wife fondling a racy pair of tangerine orange stilettos with bold black tiger stripes decorated across the front. Both women looked over, gawking at Harold’s peculiar mannerism. Kathy was especially surprised . . . and embarrassed.

The owner, dressed in her familiar ruby-red paisley dress, grinned a toothy grin. “And dearie, they’re only twenty dollars a pair,” as she glanced over at Harold.

“Wow,” said Kathy, reaching into her purse. “I could buy two pair at that price!” She started eyeing a pair with a textured leopard print.

Madam Celeste raised her right brow. “And I don’t charge no tax.”

“Nooooo,” bellowed Harold, as he launched himself towards his wife. He grabbed Kathy’s hand and pulled her away from the cash register before storming down the block and out of view of Madam Celeste.

“Harold Bailey, what the hell was that all about?” said Kathy. “I was going to buy those cool shoes

for Andrea. I wanted to return the favor after what you did.”

“Trust me honey, your best friend Andrea wants absolutely nothing to do with those shoes. In fact, it’s safe to say she’ll never ever set foot – no pun intended, at Madam Celeste’s Shoe Emporium again.”

“What are you saying?” said Kathy, dumbfounded. “They’re just shoes.”

“No, they are NOT just shoes,” blurted Harold. “That Celeste lady planted some sort of killer curse on those shoes, maybe all of them.”

“You’re worrying me, Harold.”

Harold took his wife over to a recently painted Kelly green park bench facing the single lot park. A handful of children were frolicking on the swings. “Do you want to know what really happened to me and Andrea that night? I mean the whole truth?”

“Uh, you told me you fell on my shoes and Andrea was mauled by badgers.”

Harold was pulling out his hair. “My God, honey, does that even sound plausible to you? I mean . . . badgers?”

Kathy paused. “Come to think of it, they are quite rare for our neck of the woods.” Suddenly, the light bulb started brightening. “Uh my.”

Harold explained in fine detail the strange truth of what really happened to him that Halloween Eve. He even relayed Andrea’s account. With Kathy’s stunned, jaw-dropping look solidly in place, Harold got up and bought a couple of sodas from a hot dog vender and sat back down. “Here you go.”

“Um, thanks. Maybe you should have bought us a couple of beers instead”

Harold turned to his wife. “No, we need to stay sharp.” He paused. “Look, I know this all sounds Looney Tunes, but it’s all true, I swear. I still have the wound to prove it.”

“So there was no falling on stiletto heels or killer badgers.”

“No, or killer rabbits.”

“Killer rabbits?”

“You know, Monty Python and the Holy Grail? Run away! Run away!”

“Oh, I get it.” Kathy took a sip of soda and sat up straight. “Hey, you know Andrea did mention something strange about her shoes that night. She had cut her finger and swore she saw them . . .”

“Move?” guessed Harold.

“Yeah,” answered Kathy, hesitantly. “I thought she was just kidding around; you know her.”

Harold took a gulp of soda and burped. Kathy frowned. “Look, she and I talked about this in great length, trying to figure out what we should do. In the end, we decided to not mention it to anyone because, well, who the hell is gonna believe shoes are attacking people?”

“It’s still rather insane,” replied Kathy, a sensible, even-keeled media specialist type through and through. “So if anyone buys those shoes . . .”

“Now we’re on the same page,” said Harold. “Anyone who buys those psycho stilettos is in harm’s way. We’ve got to stop this insanity today, right now.”

“So what do you have in mind? Walk up to Madam Celeste’s Shoe Emporium with a flame thrower and toast her inventory to a crisp?”

Harold took another drink of soda. “I thought of that, but too many people would notice.”

“That they would,” smirked Kathy. “How about calling the police?”

“I thought of that too, but they’re not going to believe me,” shrugged Harold.

“I know. What we need is a lava pit,” joked Kathy. “We’ll just drop ‘em . . .”

“Be serious, honey,” said Harold. “I think we should follow her to where she lives and then . . . do something.”

Kathy sighed. “Sounds like a solid plan. And what do we do until then, do a stake out?”

“Precisely,” answered her husband, finishing up his soda. “We wait here, and then follow her in a cab after she packs up and leaves. From there, let the shoes fall where they may.”

It was nearing seven in the evening. A light drizzle began to fall. The Baileys stood outside a corner deli just under a formally white store awning. They nibbled on their second bag of M&Ms with peanuts to pass the time. The two peeked around the chipped brick wall and spotted the mysterious Celeste as she pulled up in a late nineties eggplant purple Dodge Caravan spewing exhaust.

The peculiar woman scuttled back and forth until her car was filled to the brim with shoes. She pulled away from the curb, charcoal gray smoke billowing out from the

dangling tailpipe. The two jumped out and waved down a cab. Thirty-five minutes later, Harold and Kathy found themselves in a rundown neighborhood in Union City, New Jersey that fostered a distinctively dreary vibe.

The bleak evening sky helped hide the two amateur sleuths as they slinked up next to a telephone pole three houses down. They watched as Madam Celeste backed up the minivan into the driveway leading to a neglected two-story property. In the back was a dilapidated whitewashed barn.

The two moved up to the woman's mailbox, hunkering down next to a bent up chain-link fence. A line of sad looking maple trees provided sparse cover.

Madam Celeste parked the minivan just feet from the leaning barn door. She got out, looked suspiciously around before unlocking the shiny metal padlock with a key. Harold and Kathy patiently waited as the woman proceeded to unload her evil inventory, making multiple trips before creeping inside.

The two waited what seemed like hours hidden in darkness. A light drizzle began to fall. Kathy quietly called home telling the children mom and dad were running late. "Damn, I knew I should have brought my umbrella," said Harold. "What are you doing?"

"Just checking up on the kids," answered Kathy. "I said they could watch a scary movie and make macaroni and cheese."

"Fine," whispered Harold. "Hold on, what movie?"

"Evil Dead II. Our trustworthy son says it's funny."

Let the nightmares begin, thought Harold. "Okay, let's move." The two sneaked up to a side window. Harold stood up and peeked through the corner of the dingy window.

"What's she doing?" asked Kathy.

Harold squinted. "I can't see much, the window's kinda grimy."

"Hold on," said Kathy, who pulled out an extra napkin she had stuffed in her jacket pocket from the pizza restaurant. "Here, try this."

Harold wiped away a silver dollar sized spot. "Much better, gracias."

Harold peered deep inside. There, in the center of the squared room were shoes -- dozens and dozens of shoes. And against the wall were rows of boxes, all stacked nice and neat, nearly seven feet high.

"You see anything?" whispered Kathy. Harold remained silent, not able to utter a word.

"My God, she's got a warehouse of shoes in there."

Inside, Madam Celeste finished propping up the shoes, displaying them in multiple rings like some sort of wacked out coliseum event.

"Well," persisted Kathy, tugging on her husband's jacket. "Tell me."

The shoes are lined up perfectly, like people at a rock concert."

"Pardon my French, but that sounds a bit fricked up."

"You're telling me," said Harold. "Hold on, she's doing something."

In the center of the shoe coliseum was a three-foot wide

terracotta ceramic bowl brimming with a low lit fire. Madam Celeste started chanting in Latin, repeating the same verse over and over again. She sprinkled the flames with a dark powder. The flames erupted. She shouted more, her chanting reaching intolerable decibel levels. After ten minutes, Madam Celeste collapsed to her knees in exhaustion and bowed her head. The room was in total silence.

"It looks like she's performing some kind of twisted ritual. Now she's on the floor, praying I think," observed Harold.

"Praying?" asked Kathy. "Praying for what?"

Harold couldn't take his eyes off the woman. "This is too weird." A minute passed.

Suddenly there was a lone tap on the weathered barn floor.

Then another.

"Hold on, I hear a noise," said Harold.

A few more taps followed. Madam Celeste remained in the same position.

There were a few more taps then boom! The room erupted in tapping sounds like thunderous popping popcorn.

A chorus of circular stomping shoes hammered away on the wood planks like piano keys. Louder and louder they stomped, settling into a rhythmic pattern.

Madam Celeste seemed to feed off the defining noise. She started to sway, gazing up to the rafters, her arms outstretched. The woman revealed a wicked smile, baring her crooked teeth.

The rows of shoes stomped up and down, maintaining their place. It was a flat out frenzy. The shoes kept pounding away. The whole rundown structure rattled. Madam Celeste laughed hysterically. The sound was utterly intense.

The two held their ears. Harold raised his voice. We need to come back here later tonight with reinforcements.” Madam Celeste shifted her eyes towards the window and snarled.

Harold and Kathy jogged a few blocks before hailing a cab back to their parked car in Hoboken. At least the cab fare wasn’t too much. On their way home, the couple devised a plan involving matches and lots of gasoline. The cabbie glanced at his rearview mirror thinking he’d heard them all.

After much debate at the kitchen table, Harold persuaded Kathy to stay home with the kids instead of calling her mother to babysit. Instead, he called Andrea, who had no problem brushing up on some revenge at Madam Celeste’s home, expunging the shoe collection once and for all.

After midnight, Harold swung by Miss Andrea’s home who lived two towns over in his reliable silver Toyota Camry. On the way back to Madam Celeste’s home, Harold discussed his plan in full detail, gasoline and all.

“So we’re gonna try and set the night on fire,” said Andrea, referencing the Doors hit song.

“Funny Andrea. Let’s just hope we get out of here, alive,” countered Harold.

The night was miserable with scattered rain followed by patches of blanketing fog, but Harold and

Andrea didn’t care. Despite stepping into uncharted waters, the two shoe attack victims were eager for payback. They felt invigorated, almost like super heroes ready to defeat a criminal foe. Okay, maybe it was just shoes, not exactly Batman versus the Joker, or Spiderman facing the Green Goblin, but hell, those stilettos were scary from heel to toe.

Harold parked the car a block away from Madam’s house. The two got out, braving the elements all dressed in black. Harold popped open the trunk and retrieved the bright red metal gas can.

Andrea came equipped with two packs of small wooden matches. “So where does she live?”

“It’s that one, the last house on the left,” pointed Harold.

They passed a half dozen homes before reaching their destination. A perpetual shade of gray adorned the corner property. “Christ, where did this lady get her home decorating tips from, the Munsters?” Harold offered up a weak smile.

The two huddled behind shrubs and the rusted chain-link fence that separated the neighboring house. The sixty feet of twisting metal led to the back yard, butting up against a five-foot high cinderblock wall. They crept along the damp ground before reaching a large oak tree. “Follow me to the side of the barn,” said Harold.

The two darted over then crouched down beneath the window. “So this is where the nutcase cooks up her batch of killer Kates and pernicious Pradas,” quipped Andrea.

“I’m assuming those are shoe brands?” replied Harold, not really in a jocular state of mind.

“Or maybe villainous Valentinos, heinous Hush Puppies, or baneful Badgleys?”

“Enough Miss Andrea,” said Harold. “This is serious.”

“Sorry, sorry,” answered Andrea, who had a knack of rambling on in a musing string of thought. “I want payback too. You realize that lady cost me my pinky toe – and it was so cute too, along with my favorite toe ring. It was a gift from my mom you know.”

Harold stood up slowly and peered into the window then backtracked. “Your mom bought you a toe ring for your birthday? That’s kinda weird, isn’t it?”

“Not if you like toe rings.”

Harold shrugged. His thigh wound throbbed again as he pointed the flashlight inside the barn. The shoes were still, hundreds of them, all lined up in circular rows. The fire was out, a slight haze of smoke hovered in the darkened room. “Good, she’s not there.”

Harold got up and tiptoed to the corner of the barn. He noticed the padlock all secured. “Rats.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Andrea.

“She’s got a big, stinking padlock on the front door and the back door has no handle.”

“So?”

“What do you mean so?” answered Harold. “Do I look like a guy who can pick a lock? That’s not my specialty.”

“Well, I’ve had some experience – and don’t ask for any details,” quipped Andrea, who took out a slender black case filled with assorted pointed instruments. “My other specialties include mixed media art and papier mache sculpture,” she said with a smile.

“Papier mache? Isn’t that kids stuff, like making masks and volcanoes for science projects?”

“Try creating a life-sized Great Dane or eight-foot butterfly. Does that sound like kid stuff to you?” said Andrea, a bit miffed. “Mister Harold, you need a little more culture in your life. And I don’t mean yogurt, although yogurt is very good for you, but try avoiding the kind with fruit, that has tons of sugar. Am I rambling?”

“Just a little,” said Harold.

“Sorry.”

“Eight-foot butterflies? Sounds like Mothra from the old Godzilla movies.”

“Actually, Mothra was not a butterfly,” said Andrea. “She was a moth. Hence the name. Kinda rolls off the tongue much easier than Butterflyra too. Ooh, remember that annoying high-pitched squealing sound it use to make? Eeeeeee! Eeeeeee! Am I rambling again?”

“Slightly, said Harold. “Let’s get focused here, alright? Remember, we’re here to kill footwear. Now let’s get inside this barn and kick some shoe ass.”

Andrea moved ahead and crunched down at the door, ready to pick the lock when a light went on. “Damn, those motion sensors.” The two scuttled back to the corner and hunched down.

“I didn’t think of that,” said Harold. “Damn it.”

“Of course not,” replied Andrea. “You’re an accountant and I teach kindergartners how to trace their little hands to make Thanksgiving turkeys. Super sleuths, we’re not.”

“Well, we have to do this once and for all,” said Harold. “Those shoes are killing people, and apparently, that sicko Madam Celeste has no problem with that.”

Harold scoured the damp grounds and picked up a heavy four-foot long branch. He walked back over and peeked up at the sensor light, still shining bright before giving it a whack. “Alright, instant darkness,” he quietly boasted.

Andrea scampered over to the front door again. She took out her line of tools and began tinkering with the padlock like a dentist removing gunk between a child’s braces. Harold played lookout at the side of the barn. “Any progress?”

“Almost there,” replied Andrea, her tongue askew in determined concentration. “Got it!”

The two shifted inside. Harold closed the door and turned on the flashlight, shining it on the audience of shoes sitting quiet and calm like shoes normally do. “Let’s get moving,” he said, passing the flashlight to Andrea.

Harold began racing around the ring of footwear, starting in the center. He drenched each and every pair with gasoline as Andrea directed the beam of light.

“Look at all these shoes,” uttered Harold, as he finished up dousing the high heeled killers. He spotted the orange tiger print model

his wife gawked about earlier, now placed on a shelf by the door.

“Are we all set?” asked Andrea.

“I think so,” said Harold. “Let’s see if there’s anything else in here.”

The two checked out a back room: nothing but broken up old wood furniture and a makeshift work bench. As they headed back to the main room, they noticed a light on from the house.

“We need to leave now,” said Harold. “Oh no.”

“You see her?” said Andrea.

Harold’s eyes got real big. “No, but we may have a bigger problem than that.”

“What’s that?”

“Those tiger stilettos . . . they’re not on the shelf anymore.” The two collectively made a gulping sound.

“Uh oh, you hear that?” said Andrea. “It sounds like . . . purring.”

Suddenly the door burst open. There, standing alone and all dressed in deep burgundy was Madam Celeste. The tiger stilettos simultaneously jumped into her cradling arms. She began caressing them like the supervillain Blofeld and his white fluffy cat in the James Bond movies. Harold was not a cat person.

“Normally my customers don’t survive, but somehow both of you too did.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” replied Andrea, exhibiting her feistiness.

“And why a man?” asked Madam Celeste, shaking her head. “Oh hell, to each his own.”

“I don’t wear stilettos,” barked Harold, “I’m strictly a Puma brand guy!”

“Did you say Pumas? Oh I think I have a pair of those just for you along with my other big game cat collection. I see you’ve met my Bengal beauties.”

“Why are you doing this?” said Andrea. “I mean, cursing all these beautiful shoes. What did they ever do to you?”

“Oh, I have my reasons,” she replied, cunningly. “Let’s just say it’s payback.”

“Payback?” said Harold. “Payback for what? Your clientele are just average shoe shopping individuals. I don’t get it!”

“Yeah, average . . . although I’d like to think of myself as being a little bit above average,” chimed Andrea, spacing her index finger and thumb for all to see. “I’m an artist, photographer and I also played high school tennis and lacrosse, not to mention that I sing part time in the church choir. I also finished a marathon . . .”

“You’re rambling,” said Madam Celeste.

“Sorry, I tend to do that –”

“Please shut up,” said Harold.

“Thank you,” added Madam Celeste.

The tiger shoes jumped to the ground and inched towards Harold and Andrea. The pair of deep orange shoes twisted and turned like they were ready to pounce. In seconds, the tiger stilettos were joined up by a pair of leopards and cheetahs.

“Don’t do this,” begged Harold. Whatever happened in the past is in the past. You can’t change it.”

“Such enlightening words from such a vertically challenged person. No, you and the chatty Miss Andrea must die -- and sent straight to heel.”

“You mean hell, send us to hell,” said Andrea.

“I was trying to be humorous,” Miss Perky, you know, bad puns and all.” The two laughed nervously.

“No, before I unleash my collection of killer cats on you, I will tell you the truth.”

Harold glanced around and spotted what appeared to be the back door. His brain began calculating. On the floor, the circle of shoes seemed to be awakening like blooming flowers.

Madam Celeste lit a pair of black waxed candles on a circular table near the doorway. The crazed woman stared at the flames then spoke.

“A long time ago, I had designed some of the boldest stilettos on the face of the earth. But I learned at a young age that some people didn’t take too kindly to upstart designers like myself. You know the shoe design industry is a truly cutthroat business.”

The woman paused for a moment as she eyed her ring of footwear beauties. “Those prancy shoe designers stole my ideas! They made millions while I ended up selling shoes at Thom McAn!” She thrust her arms up in primal hate. “And after I was fired for inappropriate designing, I vowed then and there to seek revenge –

revenge to anyone who had wronged me.”

Andrea started applauding. “What a speech by Madam Witch. “Your freakish shoes nearly killed us!”

“Well this time I will make sure you die!” bellowed the crazed woman. Her eyes widened as she caught a whiff of the gasoline.

Harold whispered instruction to Andrea. She nodded.

“What were you two planning?” Madam Celeste growled. She paused for a moment, closing her eyes. “Attack!” she yelled in a booming voice. “Attack!”

The two bolted for the back room just as the big cat stilettos sprang from the floor. Harold closed the rickety door just as the heels pierced through the rotted wood, nearly busting through. Harold propped up a chair to hold off the shoe assault.

“Awake, awake, my footwear of hellfire. You shall reign supreme as we conquer the world of foot wear and then seek to . . .”

“So who’s rambling now, yelled Andrea as she pressed her hands on the door to hold it up.

“Watch out for those heels!” said Harold. He picked up an old mallet off the workbench and pounded away at the sealed back door. “Damn it, it’s not budging!”

“Try ramming it with your shoulder,” said Andrea. She picked up a loose plank of wood and tried to cover the holes in the door. Another direct hit and the shoes would be inside for sure.

Harold backed away, about ten feet and then charged the door.

Smack. “Ugh, that hurt.” He stepped away, but noticed a small crack. He rushed back again and charged, smacking the door with more force. Crack! He raised his leg and finished the job.

“I got it! Let’s get the hell out of here!”

As Andrea turned to run away, she was struck just below the shoulder by the tiger stiletto. She screamed in pain as blood poured from the wound. “Harold!”

He rushed back and pulled the sharp-edged heel from Andrea’s wound.

“You bastards!” Harold picked up the mallet and pulverized the stiletto. He helped Andrea up and the two crashed through the remaining parts of the door.

“Wait,” uttered Andrea, in severe pain. “Take ‘em; you know what to do.”

Harold helped her to the front corner of the barn. “Hold on, I’ll be right back. He rushed over to the front door. Madam Celeste was howling and cursing, begging the new batch of evil soles to awake and attack.

“Hey shoe salesman,” shouted Harold, “your sole is mine!” He lit a handful of matches and tossed them in the direction of the gas soaked shoes. Flames sparked up immediately. Harold placed the padlock back on the hinge and locked it.

Madam Celeste, standing near the ceramic pit, wailed like a banshee. Harold peered through the window as the shoes began awaking, stomping in unison.

Meanwhile, Andrea managed to pick the lock on the minivan and

jumpstarted it. She lowered the window and called out for Harold to get in.

Harold opened the passenger door but stood for a moment, realizing he was killing someone. He suddenly rushed back and gazed inside the side window. “Oh my God.”

Madam Celeste began flailing like a whirling dervish. The shoes suddenly began attacking her from every direction like thrown darts. In moments, she was impaled all over like a pin cushion, covered in blood. She dropped to her knees desperately trying to shield herself from the onslaught. Moment later, she lifted up her head. Staring directly in front of her was a tiger stiletto.

“No please! I gave you life!”

The lone shoe torpedoed off the floor in a heartbeat. Its pointed heel slammed straight into Madam Celeste’s forehead, killing her instantly.

Harold trembled as he staggered back to the van. “Let’s get the hell out of here.” He shielded his face as the barn quickly became engulfed in a sea of raging yellow and orange.

For the next twenty minutes, the two remained silent. It started to rain again. Andrea reached for the radio. Playing was Author Brown’s classis song, Fire. Harold quickly turned it off.

“So did she, you know, burn to death?”

“No,” answered Harold. “What she got was a taste of her own medicine.”

“The shoes killed her?”

“Yeah, so we don’t need to feel guilty.”

They made their way onto Route 287, heading towards Morris County when Andrea heard a ticking coming from the back of the van. “Did you hear something?”

“You hit a pothole, I think,” said Harold. “You know Jersey has the worst highways.”

“No, it was something else. Shine the flashlight back there.”

Harold turned around and shined the flashlight. “Oh shit.” A few remaining pairs of pulsating stilettos stood in line like eager soldiers.

“We’ve got a problem,” whispered Harold.

“Tell them the war is over, Harold!” said Andrea.

“You want me to talk to the shoes?”

“Do it, just do it!”

“Uh, just do it? That’s the Nike slogan, right? Sorry. Now I’m rambling.” Harold cleared his throat. “Dear shoes, it wasn’t anything personal that we burned you all back to hell. We are not here to harm you in any way, shape, or form. Please don’t kill us. How’s that?”

Suddenly one of the shoes shot from the back of the van, knocking the rearview mirror right off the windshield.

“I don’t think you were sincere enough!” screamed Andrea.

“I normally don’t converse with converse, how’s that for clever shoe talk?” cried Harold, panicking.

Andrea tried to stay the course as more shoes began attacking.

“I’ve got a plan,” said Harold. The two switched spots swerving all over the place on the desolate highway. Harold took the wheel and floored it. At the next jug handle, he stormed through the blinking red light and followed the sign to a secluded county park.

“Hold on!” He barreled through the locked metal post and drove up the gravel road. He slammed on the brakes overlooking a lake. “First with fire, now with water.”

“On three, we jump out and shut the doors, got it?” Andrea nodded her head.

Harold put the van in neutral at the top of the steep hill. “Ready? One. Two. Three!” The two jumped out and locked the doors then pushed the van downhill. The shoes banged against the interior of the van like socks churning in a gigantic Laundromat dryer.

“Push, push,” yelled Harold. “We gotta get some serious momentum going.”

The two watched the minivan as it struck a series of flat rocks near the base of the lake. It flew out, striking the water in a thunderous splash. It remained afloat for a moment then started sinking nose first. In minutes, the minivan was totally submerged.

Harold and Andrea scrambled down the hill near the waters’ edge. “So, is that it?” asked the art teacher.

Harold watched as the rest of the bubbles dissipated. “God, I hope so.”

A week later at Madam Celeste’s charred property, investigators wrapped up their

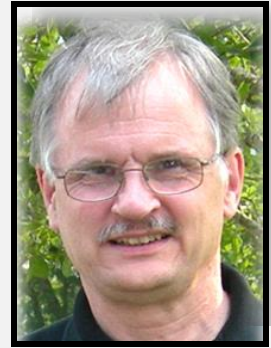
investigation stating arson was most likely culprit, although the woman’s cause of death was one for the X-Files.

A month later, a man in his early twenties discover the submerged minivan while snorkeling at the park lake. He took in a big gulp of air and dove down two fathoms. He reached the door handle and pulled. Unable to open it, he dove down again, this time clutching a pointed rock. After repeated strikes, the window broke open. He surfaced again, treading water in the brisk lake water. Just as he was about to go down again, a lone white stiletto bobbed up followed by another.

“Whoa, shoes,” he said, rather surprised. The young man watched as the shoes appeared to tread along in the still water, resembling dorsal fins. “Huh?”

The pair of great white pumps positioned themselves a foot away from each side of the man’s head. In a surprise rush, the shoes simultaneously rammed their pointed heels into man’s ears, killing him instantly. The stilettos retracted from the lifeless body, then shifted towards the shore.

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Pot Luck By Rick Weber

Gary Raintree, a Special Agent with IRS Criminal Investigation, sat at his desk in the Denver office going over a falsified tax return submitted by an identity thief. The victim, a Boulder school teacher, only learned of it after she filed her own return. She was expecting a refund only to learn that one had been sent out, but not to her. This situation was becoming all too common; Gary had no easy solution for the victim.

“Hey Gary, you got a minute?” a voice asked from the next cubicle. “I have something for you to listen to.”

“Sure,” replied Gary to the voice which belonged to his partner, Jasmine Bright.

“Good, stand by. I’m emailing to you right now.”

Gary plugged in a set of earbuds to his desktop computer and listened to the email attachment sent by Jasmine. It was short, less than a minute in length. Two men were talking in Spanish on the phone. He played it once. As soon as he finished, he turned to see his partner standing by his desk.

“Who sent you this, Jaz?”

“It’s from a DEA wiretap on a Mexican gang running heroin here, and they’re trying to identify all the players. That’s why they asked us to go over this call.”

Gary was the resident linguist in the IRS office. A Native American, a Navaho, by birth. He was brought up as a Mormon and did missionary work in South America. Blessed with a gifted ear, he could easily identify the regional accents of many Hispanics. Many law enforcement counterparts in Greater Denver often asked for his help.

“Jaz, from what I picked up, these two guys were setting up a money drop. Their codes weren’t consistent drug amounts or prices. It’s too short to get much else. Both are fluent native level speakers, but DEA no doubt knows that. What else do they want to know?”

“They need to know where these guys were from. They also wanted to know if we had anything going on involving a pawnshop laundering money.”

“From what was said, the caller is Mexican, but I can’t say more than that without more to listen to. The guy who was called has a slight trace of a foreign accent. The caller asked if he could make a deposit at ‘the pawnshop’. The other party sounded irritated but told him yes. That was the sum of their conversation.”

“They’re really interested with the guy who was called. His number was a burner phone they could not identify. It’s the only call to him so far, and he appears to be the gang’s money man. I’ll pass on your assessment to the case agent. The caller is a guy called ‘El

Gordo’, supposedly the biggest dealer between Chicago and L.A. They want to know if you’d review any future calls they get with the money man. Apparently, he’s an important piece to their puzzle.”

Gary agreed and went back to assessing the identity theft case.

As Gary pored over his file, Peace Coleman was sitting in the back office of his recreational marijuana store in town. Since opening his pot shop up almost two years ago after recreational use of the drug was approved by the state, his business was thriving, but you wouldn’t know it by looking at Peace. He stared at the wall, his face was flushed, his clothes soaked with sweat, and heart racing from stress. He regretted taking the loan out through a “friend” to open his business. The interest rate was fine and he paid it off six months early, or so he thought. His “friend” approached him out of the blue over a month ago requesting a favor. At first, Peace balked, but the “friend” reminded him that “one hand washed the other.”

Peace was the son of two flower children, hippies from the sixties, and the youngest of their six children. He grew up in Northern California where his father educated his children in cannabis horticulture. His full name was Peace Maker Coleman, a statement by his parents that the summer of love never ended, at least in their minds. When the shift toward legalization was being made, Peace moved to the “Centennial State” to stake his claim. He made good money, but now dreaded the next person to come into his store. The loan pay back was tough, but the ambush was worse.

A week after listening to the wiretap call, Gary approached Jasmine with a request of his own. Some Suspicious Activity Reports or SARs as they were called by the government were referred to him by their boss. Calling to her from his side of the partition, Gary asked, “Jaz, can you come here? I’ve got something for you to look at.” Without answering, Jaz went to the opening of Gary’s cubicle.

Seeing her, he held up several SARs. “A local bank submitted these. It looks like a local company is doing some smurfing. They’re showing a number of deposits just under the \$10K limit and then they’re making large wire transfers to some bank in The Caymans.”

“What’s the total?”

“For this month, it’s \$250K, so far.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“It started last month. The bank did a SAR when \$100K went off shore from the same account. We just got them. Take a look.”

After a quick scan of the documents, Jasmine whistled, “Someone’s in trouble. ‘Unknown Consultants LLC’, I never heard of them.

“Neither have I. Their address goes to a P.O. Box. I asked Postal Inspectors to get us the names of everyone getting mail there. In 2012, the company was incorporated in Delaware. I’m waiting to hear back from their registered agent about who the principals are in the LLC. The rest of our usual database checks came back negative. Corporate Taxes were filed for the last two years. I

want to get an idea of what these folks are all about before requesting their returns. I may need some help if it blossoms.”

“Are you asking?”

“Yes. I got a feeling that this one may go somewhere.”

Meanwhile, Peace was still not at peace. The friend kept asking for favors with no end in sight. Peace ran his business with a few employees who worked with the customers. The rest of it fell on him to handle. The strain was beginning to show. Normally a mellow guy, he recently became short tempered with his staff, who did not know what was going on. Even the use of his product line did nothing to alleviate the tension. No one but him knew the extent of his troubles.

Early the next morning, Gary took a call from Postal Inspectors advising him that besides Unknown Consultants LLC, Peace Coleman received mail at the P.O. Box. A database search for the name of Peace Coleman showed only one person with a residential address in Aurora and a business address in Denver. The business address was not too far from the office, and Gary asked Jasmine if she wanted to get out of the office for a while. She was waiting for Gary outside of his cubicle with her coat on even before he could logoff of his computer.

The address was in an older, but well kept, commercial section of town. Parking across the street, Jasmine and Gary looked at the structure without much amazement.

“Well, isn’t this precious,” Jasmine said with a laugh. “We should have known that the place would be a pot shop. Want to meet and greet the proprietor?”

Gary gazing at the storefront was slow to respond then said, “Jaz, take a look at the stained glass window above the door. This might be the place DEA is looking for.”

Her eyes widened before she said, “Or a member of the Medici family.”

The pawnshop symbol embedded in the stained glass above the door was a better drawing card than the painted letters spelling the word Marijuana on the store’s front window. No doubt, the old building once housed a pawnshop, but that was ancient history.

“Why don’t we give DEA a call before meeting the owner?” Gary asked his partner.

“Good idea,” Jasmine replied. “I’m glad I thought of it.”

Gary could only shake his head as they pulled away from the curb.

Back at the office, Jasmine called the case agent, who was stunned by their discovery, and told her that no other mention of any pot shop had yet to come up on the wire. Peace Maker Coleman was also a new name to DEA. The agent asked Jasmine if IRS could help them out with the money end of the case because the Mexicans had them busy chasing heroin loads. Both knew without commenting that if the IRS SARs investigation was the laundering side of the DEA heroin case, the indictment would be huge. Since Coleman had not yet come up in the wiretap, the two agents agreed that there was no downside to IRS approaching the pot shop owner. Before Gary and Jasmine could talk to Peace Coleman, more SAR’s came in regarding the Unknown

Consultants LLC account raising the total passing through it to just over one million dollars in less than two months. Jasmine and Gary again parked their car across the street from the shop and waited for an opportunity to approach Peace when he was alone to talk with him. That time came just after the shop closed up for the night. Peace was the last one to leave. He locked the front door but never made to his car parked a few steps from the threshold

“Hi, there,” he heard a woman’s voice call out behind him. Turning he saw a tall, attractive, African-American woman in a blue ski jacket with her hair pulled back in a pony tail standing beside him holding a folded leather case in her hand.

“Can I help you?” Peace asked.

“You sure can,” Jasmine responded opening the case she had in her hand showing him her IRS credentials.

“We need to talk,” a man told him. Turning to his left he saw a tall thin man with short dark hair and angular facial features blocking his way. It was Gary.

“I knew you’d be coming,” Peace said quietly. “Can we go someplace private?”

“Just what I had in mind,” Jasmine replied in a smug tone grabbing Peace by his right arm and leading him over to their car. A discreet frisk of the subject by Gary found him to be unarmed. A short drive to a nearby empty city park was a perfect site for their interview. With Gary behind the wheel taking notes, Jasmine turned toward Peace sitting beside her in the rear seat, and without any perfunctory remarks said, “Peace, we know

about the money your moving to the Caymans. Do you care to elaborate?”

Jolted by her bluntness, Peace began a two hour Q & A of how he got into his dilemma. “A couple of years ago, I ran into an old acquaintance of mine at the main library downtown. I hadn’t seen him in almost twenty years. I told him he looked good. He was shocked to see me but soon warmed by asking me what I was up to. I told him I was here to get in on the recreational weed market, but I needed startup funds. No bank was going to give anyone a loan to set up a pot shop. He listened to my spiel and told me that he might be able to help. He took my cell number and said he would be in touch.”

“Who is this ‘old friend’ and when did you first meet him?”

“Speedy Gonzalez, and I met him at the Burning Man festival in Nevada back in ‘95 before the event got too commercialized, like it is now. I went there from Northern California looking to sell some weed my family grew up there. It was good stuff, and I sold out in less than a day. Speedy was there with his girlfriend, Zelma, a big, fat wack job. I stayed away from her. They set up camp right beside me. Speedy was pretty cool and was interested in my family’s pot business, after seeing how much I made money in such a short time. I didn’t know what he saw in Zelma and I didn’t want to. He didn’t seem like the arty type of person you find at events like Burning Man. He had a more business oriented personality. When everything ended on Labor Day, I gave Speedy my contact

information and we went our separate ways.”

“Why did he call himself Speedy Gonzalez?”

“I heard Zelma late one night call out to him from inside their tent, ‘Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez, I got something or you,’ while Speedy and I were talking about cloning plants. He told me that he had to answer ‘her call of nature’, and that he preferred to be called Speedy. I guess his given name offended his sense of machismo, and I said okay. After Burning Man was over, I never saw him again until I met him at the library. He looked pretty much the same, a little older but still the same. Some people are like that, you know.”

Taking no time for levity, Jasmine asked, “What happened after you met him here?”

“A couple of days later, he called and told me that he had access to some venture capital. He said that the investors liked my idea, my knowledge of my product line, and my marketing ability. I assumed that Speedy told them about my success at Burning Man. He had \$50K in cash to lend me at a good rate. I jumped at it. I got the store up and running in no time. Everything was good. I repaid him in a year and a half through some wire transfers to the Caymans. Then, a couple of months ago, he asked me for a favor. When he outlined what I would be doing, I begged off, but he told me ‘one hand washed the other’. I knew I had no choice. The amounts came in at just under the \$10K reporting limit, but the wire transfers were for big amounts, well over \$100K each. I knew that red

flags would go up, and I was scared to death.”

“Did he let you know when these ‘favors’ might be repaid?”

“He just said ‘soon’, but I didn’t believe him.”

“When was the last time he contacted you?”

“A week ago he sent me a text on a burner phone he gave me with a code that I would be getting \$250K the next day. The exact amount came as scheduled. I acknowledged receiving it by text to him. He responded that ‘processing’ had to be done the following day. This meant he wanted it wired to the account he set up in the Caymans. I followed his instructions.”

“Do you ever talk with Speedy directly on the phone?”

“No, the last time I saw him was once again by the main library when he called in his marker and gave me the burner phone. He also gave me the codes we would be using and that the burner was strictly for the money drop-offs. No voice calls were to be made on it, only texts to and from him.”

“Did the same guy always do the drop offs?”

“Yeah, a short Latino kid in his mid-20’s, clean shaven, spoke broken English.”

“How many drop offs were there in all?”

“A lot, maybe around a hundred. I was getting sometimes two or three a day.”

Changing the subject Jasmine asked, “When you were at Burning Man, did Speedy tell you where he was from?”

“Yeah, he said that he and Zelma lived in the Bay Area around San Francisco.”

The interviewed wrapped up with Gary and Jasmine dropping Coleman off by his car. The next day would be very busy for the agents as they tried to verify what the pot store owner had told them.

Gary got to the office early and began the database checks for Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez. The only thing that came up was a social security number issued in California in 1995 for that name. Other than that, it was like this person never existed; never paid taxes, never had a driver’s license, never owned property, and never voted. This left Gary a bit down in the dumps. He gave his findings to Jasmine when she arrived an hour later. “Sounds like Speedy prefers running silent and deep. What about his girlfriend, Zelma? Anything on her?”

“No, without her last name it’s going to be tough. She’s probably in her mid to late 40’s now and most likely has been married a couple times, making this more complicated. I’d just like to know why someone would get a social security number and not do anything with it. He’s moving a lot of money, but for all practical purposes, he’s a ghost.”

“Why don’t you give Jack Logan in our San Francisco office a shout. Maybe, he can run down that name and Social Security number in places not found on databases.”

“It’s worth a try, but I don’t know what he can do,” Gary said as he began to type out an email request to Jack giving him the background they had for Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez.

Late that afternoon, Gary got a call from Jack. “Hey, Gary, I got something for you, dates of birth and death for Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez. Born in New York in 1972. Died here in California the same year. Killed in a car crash along with his parents.”

“How did you get that?” Gary asked, amazed that Jack Logan had come up with anything at all.

“I got a contact over at the Social Security Inspector General’s Office who was able to give me the date of birth. I did some other checking and found a death certificate in Sacramento. You’re chasing a dead man.

“Wow!” Gary gasped as he gathered his thoughts. “I don’t know what else to say besides, thanks.”

“You man is slick. Good luck, and let me know if you need any more help.”

“I will,” Gary said as he hung up and he briefed Jasmine.

“That info helps, Gary, but are we any further ahead?”

“No, no driver’s licenses, passports, or anything like that have come up with that name and DOB. We have to keep plugging.”

“I’ll let DEA know maybe something will pop up.”

The case agent again thanked Jasmine and Gary for their help and asked if they would be willing to show Coleman some pictures of the Mexican gang members in order to identify the money courier. Jasmine agreed and contacted Peace to set up a follow up interview at the IRS office. Coleman showed up without a lawyer in tow.

The photo spread had past arrest mug shots for twelve members of the gang. Peace immediately picked out the courier, known as “Flaco” to his peers. Coleman had unwittingly put himself into the middle of a conspiracy to distribute heroin. Jasmine asked him if he would be willing to sit down with an artist to do a sketch of Speedy.

“How about if I drew it myself,” he answered. “I like to do art in my spare time. Just give me some blank sheets of paper and a couple of pencils.”

Sitting in the interview room with Peace as he drew, Gary and Jasmine posed more questions about Speedy and Zelma to him. He was not distracted by them as he sketched.

“We were all about the same age. Speedy never let on much about himself. Zelma, for as crazy as she came across, was more open. She said she also grew up in California like me, but in Fresno. She had a lousy childhood, and moved to the Bay Area after high school. She also mentioned something about working for the government but was too flaky to give out anything specific.”

“Flaky?” Gary asked.

“She talked like she wasn’t all there. She had mood swings; one minute on top of the world, the next under it, and she wasn’t stoned. She was best left to herself and to Speedy. Her weight, I think, was also part of her mental problems. She was extremely obese.

An hour after Jasmine gave him the paper and pencils, Coleman showed them a drawing worthy of being hung in a gallery. However,

Speedy was just an ordinary guy with short dark hair, close set eyes, and clean shaven with a mole on his right cheek. There was nothing about him that would make him stand out in a crowd. The interview ended with Jasmine telling Coleman that she and Gary would be consulting with the US Attorney's Office about the level of his cooperation.

The next morning looking at Peace's sketch of Speedy after they scanned it into their case file, Jasmine asked Gary if he wanted to go out for coffee.

Gary looked up at the ceiling for a moment and told her, "I can't. Something just came to me. I got to call Jack Logan, and I have to go check something out."

"Need any help?"

"No, this might be another wild goose chase. Go, enjoy your latte."

Gary placed his call to Jack, and after a few minutes on the phone, left for the main public library where he spoke with a reference librarian. An hour later he was back at the office.

"So, what are the wild geese telling you?" Jasmine asked him.

"That, things might not be so wild after all. I asked Jack how he knew that the real Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez was killed in a car accident with his parents. He told me after he saw the cause of death was due to an accident on the certificate, he had a newspaper reporter he knew in Sacramento check their archives for 1972. A short article was found giving the details; all the victims' names, Geoffrey's and his parents', the only other persons involved in a single car accident. It also said that the

parents were visiting friends in the area and were post-doctoral fellows in British Literature at Berkley. I guess that's why their son was named Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez.

"I asked Jack to follow up with SSA IG to see if they have, or had an employee with the first name Zelma. There can't be too many of them out there.

"I then went by the library and found out that they have old newspapers printed before 1989 on microfilm. I think that over the years Speedy Gonzalez, or whoever he is, researched dead persons' identities to get legal documents, such as, social security cards, drivers licenses, even passports to cover his tracks. But, he only chooses those who died before getting a Social Security card, and therefore were not on the SSA Death Master List. Speedy was most likely doing 'research' when Coleman ran into him at the library two years ago."

"I see where you're going," Jasmine said. "He has Peace running his money to an off-shore account knowing that it's only a matter of time before Peace gets jammed up, and when it happens, he's long gone. I bet the Mexicans he's working with don't even know his real name for the same reason. When it's all said and done, the government indicts a dead man with the rest of the crew. Nice work!"

Once again late in the afternoon, Jack Logan called Gary back, who put it on speaker so Jasmine could listen. "Gary, you were right, and you owe me big time for this one. The SSA IG didn't even have to query their database about Zelma. He said that they only had

one working in their entire region and she's an upper level manager in San Francisco. We went to her office for an interview and I was shocked. The woman I was introduced to was Zelma Lloyd, nee Booker, a twenty-five year IRS employee, but she looked nothing like the woman you described. This one is in her late forties, slim, attractive I might add, and very well grounded. I thought we had the wrong woman. We told her why we were there and she offered us to take a seat.

"She said she was the person we were looking for, but added that she is a different person now. She told us that she was having mental issues when she met Speedy in 1995. They lived together for a couple of months, and he asked her to submit his application for a social security card. She made sure he had the right documentation required at the time i.e. a birth certificate and that the paperwork was in order before she put it in. She did not remember all the details of their time together, but recalled that he spent time at libraries doing research. He even did her family tree from when her ancestors came to California during the Gold Rush.

"She remembered going to Burning Man and meeting a guy called Peace. A week after Burning Man, Speedy packed up and left while she was at work without even leaving her a good-bye note. She had a complete breakdown. Her supervisor came by after she failed to show up for work a couple of days in a row and found her in distress. Her boss referred her to the Employee Assistance Program for help. The boss also documented that she put through

the paperwork for Speedy's Social Security card, which was deemed to be within guidelines at that time.

"She returned to work after some in-patient care and with medication has been a model employee ever since. She met a man some years back who helped her get her self-esteem back. She got in shape, lost weight, and they got married. Nice ending to what could have been a bad story.

"She identified Speedy from the drawing you sent saying it's the same guy."

"You mentioned that Speed did Zelma's family tree. What happened to it?" Jasmine asked Jack.

"She told us that she tore it up and burned it, along with other memorabilia from their time together in a trash can behind her apartment when she had her breakdown. She has no pictures, letters, or anything else like that about from her time with Speedy. I guess it's just as well she did that. She openly told us that she was a mess and burning those items was the first step in her recovery."

The call with Jack ended, and Jasmine asked Gary rhetorically, "Well, what's next?"

"Let's see what kind of deal the U.S. Attorney is willing to offer Peace. The heroin wire has to be coming down soon, and the case will be going to a grand jury for indictment. We have to get Peace's testimony memorialized in front of one to lock him in before the takedowns occur. We also have to let him know the rules of the road."

"The last part is going to be the hardest. I don't think testifying

before a grand jury or, worse yet, in open court is part of Peace's master plan. After we talk with the U.S. Attorney, let's have that sit down with Mr. Coleman."

"I agree," said Gary.

The offer was pounded out by the prosecutor, and a meeting with Coleman, this time with an attorney, was set up to present it. The deal was that in exchange for his cooperation, which included testifying in all judicial proceedings, Peace would have to plead guilty to one count of money laundering for which he would receive no jail time, but with a ten year suspended sentence and \$25,000.00 fine. Coleman would also have to close up, not sell, his pot shop and remain out of trouble during his probation. If he violated his probation, Peace would serve a twenty year prison sentence. Coleman huddled with his lawyer privately and came back to the table.

"We find the government's offer acceptable under the circumstances," the defense lawyer said, but before he could continue Peace jumped in.

"This isn't right. If I could've gotten a regular business loan, none of this would've happened. Because the federal government says pot is illegal, I can't use what's available to other businesses. I can't use a bank because it's money laundering. I can't get a business loan..."

This time Jasmine was the one butting in. "Peace, your involvement with a Mexican heroin gang is what led to you downfall. You washed a lot of money for them, and that's what you're being charged with.

"As far as you not being able to go through normal channels to get a business loan, you couldn't have gotten one anyway. To begin with, you had no credit rating or business experience to secure a loan for any kind of business. You knew full well when you moved to Colorado that you would be skirting the law. You did this with your company, Unknown Consultants, LLC. You told your bank you were a consulting firm and listed your employees, as advisers. I don't want to go into how much of your strictly cash business was claimed on your tax returns. So, why don't you take this as a gift? Consider it 'pot luck'."

Both Coleman and his lawyer nodded and formally accepted the government's offer without further comment. When they left, Gary turned to Jasmine with a smile and said, "Well done! Have you ever considered a career in law?"

"Not in this lifetime," came her response.

Peace kept his promise and testified that he laundered the gang's drug money. A grand jury returned an indictment. The heroin gang was taken down in a series of early morning arrests. The only person not taken into custody was a party identified as "AKA 'Speedy Gonzalez'" on the indictment.

Two weeks after the gang was rounded up, word got back to Gary and Jasmine of an accident in Central Mexico in which a bus collided with a gasoline tanker causing both vehicles to be engulfed by flames. The American Consulate was notified that among the dead was Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez. His social security card and some other charred documents

found with him were used to identify him according to Mexican authorities.

Jasmine shook her head and told Gary, “If anyone believes that, I got a bridge in Brooklyn to sell them.”

Gary nodded, “I’d hate to play chess against a guy like that. He’s always, at least, ten moves ahead of his opponent, which is just about everyone for him. He’s a long term planner who knows how to work the system. Most likely, he has collected a cache of backstopped ID’s over the years, and he uses them to block himself off from friend and foe alike. No doubt early on, he found out that a name like Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez would leave a trace back to him, whoever he is, and he perfected his tradecraft accordingly. He uses every opportunity that comes his way; Zelma in the beginning and Peace as of late, and he does not care. He has a few ‘friends’ like the Mexican officials who identified Geoffrey Chaucer Gonzalez as dead, but not many.”

“I’d like to see him locked up, but we have to find his real identity first.”

“True, but we have other things to do until then. First on my list is a call back to a Boulder school teacher about her tax return.”

A cold gust of wind came across, the shores of Lake Ontario smacking the city of Toronto. In front of luxury high-rise apartment building, a man bundled in an overcoat got out of a taxi and paid the driver. He rolled his suitcase case through the main door and was greeted by the doorman who waved to him.

“Sir, I have a package for you. It’s been here a couple of days.”

Walking over to the front desk, the man took off his hat and gloves then scratched a mole on his right cheek before saying, “Thank you. It’s probably just more ‘work’ for me to do.” Taking the package in his free hand, he rolled his suitcase into a waiting elevator nearby, and its door closed.



Trembling Souls: A Stains Novella

By Jamie White

Chapter One:

A redheaded young woman stood at the edge of a large ship with her companion watching the water ripple beneath them. They were a couple of weeks into a journey to the New World and she couldn’t wait to arrive. It felt like a lifetime since they’d left their native England to see what this new land had to offer; she hadn’t slept properly since. The feeling of the boat moving beneath her made her uncomfortable and her stomach lurched in protest with every wave.

“How much longer do you think it will be until we land?”

“I wouldn’t think more than another day or so.” He stared out into the night, a faraway look in his eyes. The trip clearly took a toll on him as well. His shoulders slumped as he hunched over the railing and stared at the small waves crashing into the ship. He’d always been overly protective of her and hadn’t let her out of his sight the entire trip.

She frowned as she examined the dark circles under his eyes. *I don’t think he’s slept one good night since we left.* “It’ll be exciting to see what all the fuss is about... where do you think we’ll settle?”

“I don’t know, there are plenty of suitable areas in the New World. I suppose we’ll head west and see where we end up.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

She leaned on the railing, turning her attention back to the water below. She couldn’t help but be struck with the vastness of what stretched before her. It made her and the other passengers on board seem small by comparison. How could you not feel insignificant when surrounded by such power? As she contemplated this, a chill settled in her bones. It wouldn’t take much at all for her to disappear into that water. She wouldn’t be able to see anything around her and would get lost in the waves. The thought caused her to shudder.

“What’s the matter?” Her husband studied her with concerned eyes as he put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently.

“It’s nothing, really. I was just thinking about how big the water is—how much power it holds.”

“It is pretty magnificent. Does it scare you?”

“A little.”

He stepped back a pace, looking at the ocean again. “Good.”

She blinked and raised an eyebrow in confusion. “I don’t understand...”

“I mean that you’ll be more careful if you’re fearful of falling overboard.”

The very thought horrified her. “That wouldn’t happen, would it?”

“Not if you’re careful. Come, let us find a place to lie down for the night.”

The pair turned around and headed further into the deck. After a brief search they found a quiet spot to rest. She lay her head on his chest as they settled on the ground, his heartbeat offering some comfort in the strange surroundings.

Fiona Stevens mumbled in her sleep, moving restlessly under the covers. A frown crossed her features as the scene shifted in her mind.

The storm raged around them, rocking the boat so hard the girl feared they’d all be thrown over the railing. The sound of the water echoed in her mind, the salt spray hitting her with an intensity she never could have imagined. Back home, she’d never been close enough to an ocean to see the water at its worst and this was a horrifying first lesson. Her husband’s arms wrapped tight around her as he directed her to a small corridor to get some shelter from the storm.

She tried to move as fast as possible, but the rocking boat hampered their progress. Her eyes were wide and fixed straight ahead. She wanted more than anything to

be back on dry land and couldn’t remember why they’d left on this insane journey to begin with. Another wave crashed, causing them to tumble to the ground. The woman let out a pained cry as her elbow hit the floor of the ship. Her husband stood again and reached down to pull her back to her feet. Just as the two began to move, a large wave came across the deck with such force, it separated them. In an instant, she was knocked back down to the ground. Instinct forced her to get up before she could be crushed beneath the feet of hundreds of weary travelers seeking to protect themselves from the elements. She called out to him, but he couldn’t hear over the combined noise of the storm and crowd. Minutes later, she spotted him and began frantically waving her arms to get his attention.

Before she could, a fellow passenger bumped her into the railing. At the same moment, another large swell rocked the ship. The combination of the two forced her off her feet and she screamed as she found herself tumbling over the side.

The icy water sliced into her flesh, even through her clothes. She thrashed about in the water, screaming for help and unable to see anything with the salty spray stinging her eyes. The chill of the sea, combined with the heaviness of her wet clothing, drained her strength. She struggled to keep herself afloat but it was a futile effort. A wave washed over her, pulling her under and causing panic to rise within. The woman clawed for the surface, but she was disoriented and made no progress. Her lungs burned in protest, demanding air, but the young

woman was resistant. She knew if she opened her mouth now, she’d have no chance. Even so, the desire to take a breath overpowered her.

Fiona sat up in bed, gasping for air as she shivered from the memory of the frigid waters in her dream. A sound to the right snapped her out of the dreamy haze, causing her to scream.

The bathroom door flew open and her boyfriend, Ted Richards, ran out, looking around the room. “What happened? Are you all right?”

It was just a dream...

She sighed as the tension in her body dissipated. “I’m fine. I guess I just had a nightmare.”

He walked over to the bed, sitting down in front of her. He rubbed her arm gently, his voice calm and soothing. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Fiona bit her lip as she considered his question. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that the dream was real and they’d both been there—just like the nightmares she’d had a year ago. Did he remember being on that boat? If not, did she want to remind him? Still, she didn’t believe in coincidences, so maybe there was a reason they came back on a night she’d stayed over at his place.

“Not really, but I guess I should.” She recounted the dream for him, trying to soften some of the details as much as possible.

Ted moved and Fiona shifted to the side to allow him to settle in next to her. He put an arm around her and pulled her close. “How long have you been having them?”

“Tonight was the first one. Don’t even ask what I think it’s telling me—I have no idea.”

He smiled that smile of his that told her he’d been about to do just that. She couldn’t help grinning in response. “Sorry for freaking you out. I can’t believe I just screamed like that.” Her face heated as she remembered the sound she’d made.

“Are you kidding? Don’t worry about it. Just promise you’ll let me know if it happens again.”

Fiona shivered as some of the details replayed in her mind. She hoped like hell there weren’t more on the way. “I will.”

Fiona walked to class the next morning, enjoying the feel of the cool air brushing her skin. She was grateful for the sudden change in temperature; it helped to wake her up some. Her exhaustion that morning was something even her customary cup of coffee couldn’t solve.

Imagine that...

She adjusted the bag on her shoulder, trying to banish any thoughts of dreams and lost sleep. There were more immediate problems to focus on, like the exams they had coming up and the paper she still had to write.

As the thought crossed her mind, a feeling of dread settled in her stomach and her breath caught.

Okay, I get it.

The sensation eased and she was able to breath properly again. Sometimes she hated how in tune she was with her intuition, angels, whatever one wanted to call it. It

made living in blissful ignorance difficult.

“Fiona! Wait up!”

The sound of her friend’s voice carried across the yard, offering her a temporary distraction. She stopped and turned around, watching as Anita Jacobs approached. They’d met at the beginning of her freshman year in a science lab and became fast friends. Now, they were roommates as well. As Anita reached her, Fiona turned and fell into step with her.

“So, are we still on for later or what? I never heard back from you yesterday.”

Fiona’s eyes widened as she remembered the text she’d never responded to the day before. “Wow, I’m such an airhead. Sure! You said six, right?”

“Very good! You’ve got some brain cells left, after all.”

Fiona smacked her friend lightly on the arm. “Ha, ha. So what’s the plan exactly?”

“I think we should try that new place that opened last week. There’s a band tonight.”

“Sounds cool. We’ll be ready.”

“Good!” Anita’s smile faded as she watched Fiona a moment. “Are you okay? You look like a wreck.”

“You’re full of compliments today.”

“I’m serious.” She put a hand on Fiona’s shoulder, forcing her to stop. “Did something happen?”

Fiona shook her head. “Just some weird dreams and lots of cramming—no big deal.”

No way was she going to say more than that. Even after knowing

each other all this time, Anita still gave her weird looks on occasion when Fiona’s intuition proved right. She couldn’t imagine what Anita would think if she knew the whole story.

“Say no more. I hate exam time. Too many people turn into zombies. You definitely need some fun, stat.”

Fiona laughed. “Tell me about it.” She stopped outside her classroom and motioned to the door. “I’ll see you later.”

“See ya!” Anita waved and veered off towards her own class, running after someone.

Fiona shook her head and smiled as she heard Anita yell out something about needing to borrow notes. Fiona opened the door and walked inside, looking around for an empty chair. She spotted one near the back of the room and took a seat.

Just made it.

The second she’d sat down the professor began his lecture, without even a look at his students. She’d quickly learned the man was all business. Too bad for Fiona, he was boring as well. His voice droned in a mind-numbing monotone, which did little to keep her awake. She could actually feel the caffeine being drained from her bloodstream as she struggled to keep up with what he was saying. Her only hope at this point was making it through the class without snoring. At the rate things were going, even that didn’t seem likely.

A hand touched her shoulder and Fiona jumped. She glanced around, seeing she was still in class. Her eyes widened in surprise as the other students pushed back chairs and gathered up books. Loud

chatter filled the air as some paired up to discuss plans for later.

How long was I out?

“He got you too, huh? Don’t worry about it—You’re not really one of Walsh’s students until he’s put you to sleep.”

Fiona stood, gathering her things from the desk. Once she’d finished, she turned and came face to face with Mike Harris. “Yeah, I guess he did. Was I completely obvious?”

Mike waved away her concern with a laugh. “Nah, I don’t think anyone else noticed.”

“Good. So, you going with us later?” She followed him to the door. She’d met him last year when he’d transferred to Lockhart from some school in New York. It hadn’t taken him long to insert himself into their group. Given how close he and Anita had gotten, she figured he had to be going.

“You know it.” As they stepped outside the classroom, he tapped on one of the books he held. “Gotta run and return this thing... let Anita know I’ll catch her there.”

“Sure... see ya.” Fiona waved and hurried off to her next class. She frowned as she remembered having had a dream during her nap. When she tried to focus on the details, nothing came to mind.



Marital Christmas

By CP Bialois/Ed White

Joan Schmitt stretched in the morning light filtering through the curtains and let out a groan. She couldn’t help but smile at the beautiful golden light. After the constant snow storm the last couple of days, seeing anything besides white and gray clouds was reason to rejoice.

She remained under the comforter for a few minutes, basking in the glow and warmth of the bed. Nothing was quite like Christmas. Every year it brought some form of magic into their house. The magic of that year was two-fold. First, her husband would be coming home after being stuck in a hotel on a business trip due to the weather. It’d been a week since she last saw him and it gave her the chance to find him the perfect gift.

Thinking of his present caused her smile to widen and gave her a burst of energy to start the day. Throwing off the comforter, she swung her legs out of bed and rested her bare feet on the hard wood floor. The feeling of the cold floor helped to stimulate her better than the strongest coffee could have. Her husband would have lectured her about not wearing

socks or slippers, but she didn’t care. This was going to be a day to remember if she had anything to say about it.

She moved about the bedroom picking out what to wear to greet her husband. After a few minutes of riffling through her closet, she settled on the dress he bought her their first Christmas together. The dress was white with plastic ironed-on red cherries scattered over its surface and a medium green collar shaped as Christmas trees. With a brief flourish, she slid it over her head and straightened it.

Normally, she didn’t like to hurry when getting dressed, but she didn’t know how long she had until Phillip walked through the front door and she wanted to be ready for him. She turned to look in the mirror and smiled. Somehow, her hair hadn’t been messed up as much as she feared while sleeping. With a few strokes of her brush, her light-brown shoulder length hair looked like she just stepped out of the hairdresser. The sight brought another smile to her face as she knew it would please her husband even without her wearing any makeup.

Phillip was many things, including predictable. Despite his best effort to appear nonchalant and impulsive, she knew what his every action and response would be. It was how she knew what to get him for Christmas, after all.

Pleased with her appearance, she hurried downstairs. Humming her favorite Christmas song, she reached the bottom of the steps and pressed the power button on the cd player. With Dean Martin’s voice filling the room, she made her way into the kitchen to finish the ham she prepared with honey glaze.

“Just like Phillip likes it.” Joan giggled at herself for speaking with no one else around. It was one of the many habits she had that drove her husband crazy, but if he wasn’t there, she couldn’t get into trouble.

As she put the ham in the oven and turned it on, her thoughts went back to how she picked out Phillip’s present. Of all the things she could’ve chosen for him, this year’s gift was the most difficult one she had ever had to figure out. She had to give him credit. For the first time in their ten year marriage, he had managed to keep something from her. If only she had figured it all out three years before, she could have given him the perfect gift so much sooner!

Oh well, it’s too late to worry about that now. At least he’ll get it this year. Joan straightened and looked around the kitchen. She had everything else ready to go, but she had to wait a couple of hours until the ham was cooked. Shrugging at her own efficiency, she turned and headed back to the living room as another song by a singer she didn’t know played.

She stopped in the center of the room and looked around. Everything looked perfect, just as she always made it for the holidays. A feeling of fulfillment swept through her. There was just one more thing she had to check on before Phillip returned.

Turning on her heel, she made her way across the living room to the door on her right that led into Phillip’s den. A moment of doubt passed through her when her hand came into contact with the doorknob. Would her husband like the present she got for him? It wasn’t something she could give

him every year, which made it all the more personal and special. At least, she thought so.

Certain Phillip would appreciate her effort, she turned the doorknob and opened the door a crack, just enough so she could peak inside. When she saw her present was still as she left it, Joan closed the door, turned, and rested her back against the door. She closed her eyes and imagined the look on his face when she would open the door for him to see it. The image in her mind filled her with a warm feeling she hadn’t felt in a long time.

Her mind was so wrapped in what she expected to happen, that she didn’t hear the front door open and her husband enter until he spoke her name.

“Joan? Are you all right, sweetie?” He set his suitcase on the floor and his jacket over the back of the recliner.

She opened her eyes and greeted him with the widest smile she could manage. “I’m fine. How was your trip?” She pushed off from the door and met Phillip in the center of the room, embracing him. The sound of his heart beating under her ear and the smell of his cologne caused her head to swim.

His hold on her tightened as he exhaled. “Aside from being kept away from you?”

She let out a laugh and pulled away from him. “As much as I’d like to take credit for that, I think some of it belongs to our home.”

Phillip’s face split into a grin as laughter burst from him. “And who makes our home what it is?”

Joan’s face flushed a deep red and he pulled her back into his arms and kissed her. Her body

tingled from his kiss. She never could resist him when he was near her. It was one of the few times where she could lose herself and the problems of the real world. Things were different this time as she stepped back and smiled at him.

“Not yet. You have your Christmas present and dinner. Then we can begin the festivities.” Her eyes glinted with a mischievous spark.

Phillip smiled and let out a low growl. “Do we have to wait?”

Joan’s smile widened and she turned, taking him by the arm while guiding him to his den door. “You wouldn’t want the gift I worked so hard to get you to languish while we partake, would you?” Just like his presence infused her with a feeling of desire, she knew her words had the same effect on him.

After a second of thought he nodded. “Okay, we’ll do it your way.”

A soft chuckle escaped from Joan that promised of many wonderful things to come. Phillip continued to grin like a foolish school boy. *This is the look I fell in love with. It’s so fitting right now.*

Joan’s free hand reached for the doorknob, but before she opened the door she glanced at her husband and raised an eyebrow. “Are you ready?”

Phillip let out a gleeful laugh as he nodded. “I guess I am.”

“Good.” Joan turned the doorknob and pushed the door open while watching Phillip’s reaction.

He turned his attention from her to his den. It took a minute for the

scene before him to register and he took a pair of steps into the room. “Sarah...”

His secretary was at his desk. Her feet and hands were bound. Her insides were pulled out and spread across her favorite school girl outfit she liked to wear for him during their “working weekends”. A long, jagged gash ran from the yoke of her throat to her navel and her eyes were glazed over from the agony of her death.

Joan had allowed Phillip to enter before her so she could slip a large crescent wrench from its hiding place on the table next to the opened door. “It took me a long time to find you the right gift. Merry Christmas, Sweetheart.”

Phillip started to turn toward her, but she struck him on the back of the head with the wrench as hard as she could. Blood spurted out, covering her dress as it mixed with the cherries, creating a macabre decoration and Phillip fell to the floor with a wet, smacking thump.

Joan waited and watched him for a few minutes as she wondered if he appreciated her present or the effort it took for her to bring Sarah to their home and prepare her the previous night.

A smile played across her face as Joan knew he liked his present as much as she did choosing it. She set the wrench aside and closed the door while humming a Christmas hymn. She still had a dinner to finish and enjoy. *It's too bad Phillip isn't feeling well enough to eat with me.*

Portal Poetry Corner

~ Muse Problems ~ By Jamie White

The distractions are never-ending. Games, websites, and videos make it hard to get through. People grumbling and complaining, no matter what you do. Don't take our gift for granted and put it on a shelf, For the muse that goes unheeded, talks to someone else.

HAIKU FOR THE SEASONS By Barbara Jean Kaufman

FALL

I miss Autumn
Crimson, golden-brown, deep –
green leaves fall.
Apple and pumpkin pies. A cozy
time.

WINTER

Connecticut snow
A tall white Birch stands alone.
Red – green, Wood – Ducks, wait to
mate.

SPRING

My Bromeliad bloomed.
A Humming Bird sips nectar.
Too fast for my cat.

SUMMER

Hot, southern, FLORIDA
Beaches are full. Where is shade?
Finally, A cool sunset.

Rising up to the Sun By Barbara Jean Kaufman

I see these trees with common
leaves
Unlike the palm leaves that breeze
with the wind.

The sun makes these trees big and
green
The sun makes its leaves rise up,
serene
Do these trees have flower bulbs?
Do these trees have Fruit?
In any case, each bulb is closed
But each bulb still “rise up” at the
sun
I can't wait for the spring warmth
These trees will bloom, still rising up

I will then find the answer
A fruit or a flower looms, I swear

SPRING TIME!

WOW! How did that big bulb open
up with dozens of tiny leaves? How
cool is that?
Dozens of tiny leaves, created in a
bulb!
You know, I still can't find the name
of this tree. There are hundreds of
Florida native trees.
I still see them, with their many
green bulbs, strong, and still
soaring up at the sun
After the bulbs open, the leaves
spread out to full bloom.
But the green bulbs turn to brown
and then they fall to the ground.
What a beautiful “cycle of life” to
see
They remind me of me. I grow in all-
aspects of life. I re-evaluate my life,
and I make changes with strength,
and compassion, and love. Well, at
least I try.
But I forgive myself and others, for
our mistakes, our short-comings,
and yes, even our ignorance

Check out CP's
many novels at
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The Writer’s Group meetings are held the second Monday of every month in the second floor conference room from 6:00 – 7:30pm.

Upcoming dates 2015:

April 13, May 11, June 8, July 13, Aug 10, Sept 14, Oct 12, Nov 9, and Dec 14.

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Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal to Michael DiVitto Kelly at mkelly@broward.org.

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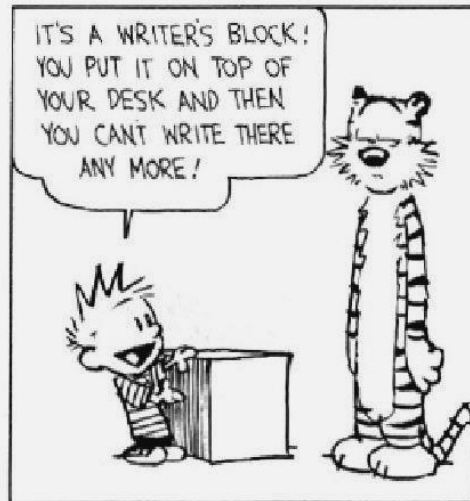
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FEEDBACK CORNER

We want to hear from you! Let us know what you think of our stories. Feel free to email Michael Kelly, head of the writer’s group at mkelly@broward.org or call (954) 201-8870.



Keep Writing



**Happy Birthday
William Shakespeare
(1564–1616)**

Check out our website at www.thewritersportal.yolasite.com to view back issues and more.